

The Isolator, Vol. 5: The Liquidizer

Reki Kawahara
Shimeji

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM



Sect.005

**THE
LIQUIDIZER**

REKI KAWAHARA
ILLUSTRATION BY SHIMEJI

REALIZATION OF
ABSOLUTE SOLITUDE

THE ISOLATOR



THE ISOLATOR

realization of absolute solitude



Sect.005

The Liquidizer

REKI KAWAHARA

ILLUSTRATION BY SHIMEJI





» TOMOMI MINOWA

"I LIKE
RUNNING
WITH YOU,
MINOWA."

"I REALLY
LIKE
RUNNING
WITH
YOU, TOO,
UTSUGI.
BUT...FOR
SOME
REASON..."

» MINORU UTSUGI

"...WELCOME
BACK, SUU."

"THANK
YOU,
MINORU."

» SUU KOMURA





» LIQUIDIZER

» OLIVIER SAITO

"WHERE IS STARGAZER?"

"...SO IS THAT A DISGUISE? OR YOUR REAL SELF?"

» YUMIKO AZU

"...YOUR LITTLE SISTER...IS IN THE RUBY EYE SYNDICATE'S MAIN HEAD-QUARTERS."



MINISTRY OF HEALTH, LABOR, AND WELFARE INDUSTRIAL SAFETY (ALSO KNOWN AS THE SFD)
AND HEALTH DEPARTMENT, SPECIALIZED FORCES DIVISION
AN ORGANIZATION OF PEOPLE WITH JET EYE ABILITIES LIKE MINORU'S.



» MINORU UTSUGI

AN ORDINARY BOY WHO LIVES WITH HIS STEPSISTER NORIE.

HIS CODE NAME IS ISOLATOR. HE CAN CREATE A PROTECTIVE SHELL THAT ALLOWS NOTHING INSIDE.

» CHIEF HIMI

THE PERSON IN CHARGE OF THE SFD. SHE HAS THE POWER TO ALTER MEMORIES.

» SANAÉ IKOMA

YUMIKO'S FORMER PARTNER, WHO IS NOW IN A COMA. HER CODE NAME IS SHOOTER.

» SHOU KOMURA

SUU'S OLDER BROTHER, WHOSE CODE NAME IS SPECTATOR. HIS ABILITY IS REMOTE VIEWING.

» CLAIRE SAITO

OLIVIER'S YOUNGER SISTER. LIKE HER BROTHER, SHE IS A MEMBER OF THE SFD.

» LINDENBERGER

AN SFD MEMBER WITH JET EYE POWERS.



A MEMBER OF THE SFD WHO OFTEN RIDES A MOTOR-CYCLE. HER CODE NAME IS ACCELERATOR. SHE CAN AMPLIFY THE SPEED OF HER LEGS, HER MOTOR-CYCLE, AND SO ON.

» YUMIKO AZU



THE STRONGEST JET EYE USER IN THE SFD. HER CODE NAME IS REFRACTOR. SHE HAS THE ABILITY TO BECOME INVISIBLE TO OTHERS.

» SUU KOMURA

A FOURTH-YEAR ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENT WHO SERVES AS THE SFD'S DEPUTY CHIEF AND STRATEGIC COMMANDER. ALSO KNOWN AS THE PROFESSOR. HER CODE NAME IS SPECULATOR.



» RIRI ISA

A HALF-JAPANESE, HALF-FRENCH YOUNG MAN. HIS CODE NAME IS DIVIDER. HE CAN CUT THROUGH ANY SUBSTANCE AS LONG AS HE HAS A BLADE.



» OLIVIER SAITO

OLIVIER'S PARTNER, WHO CAN SENSE THINGS OF INTEREST FROM LONG DISTANCES. HIS CODE NAME IS SEARCHER.



» DD (DENJIROU DAIMON)

THE SYNDICATE

AN ORGANIZATION OF RUBY EYES THAT THE SFD PURSUES.



TRANCER

A YOUNG RUBY EYE WHO GOES BY RYUU MIKAWA. HE HAS THE ABILITY TO INSTANTLY FREEZE WATER.



LIQUIDIZER

THE STRONGEST MEMBER OF THE SYNDICATE, WHO TAKES ON MANY DIFFERENT DISGUISES. SHE HAS THE ABILITY TO INDUCE LIQUEFACTION IN ANY SOLID MATTER.

EMPATHIZER

HAS THE ABILITY TO SEE INTO OTHER PEOPLE'S MEMORIES.

LUBRICATOR

ABILITY UNKNOWN.

RUBY EYES

STINGER

A RUBY EYE WHOSE IDENTITY AND GOALS ARE UNKNOWN. APPEARS TO HAVE MULTIPLE POWERS AND HUNTS SYNDICATE AND SFD MEMBERS ALIKE.



BITER

REAL NAME: HIKARU TAKAESU. HE HAS INCREDIBLY HARD TEETH THAT CAN BITE THROUGH ANYTHING.



IGNITER

REAL NAME: YOUSUKE NAKAKUBO. HE HAS THE ABILITY TO MANIPULATE OXYGEN FREELY.



OTHERS

NORIE YOSHIMIZU

A WOMAN WHO TOOK MINORU IN AFTER HIS PARENTS DIED. WITH A BRIGHT AND CHEERFUL PERSONALITY, SHE'S ALWAYS WORRYING ABOUT MINORU.



TOMOMI MINOWA

A CLASSMATE OF MINORU'S SINCE MIDDLE SCHOOL. SHE LOST HER MEMORIES OF MINORU ONCE, BUT SHE BECAME FRIENDS WITH HIM AGAIN.



THE ISOLATOR
realization of absolute solitude



CONTENTS

001 SECT. 005 -THE LIQUIDIZER-





THE ISOLATOR
realization of absolute solitude

Sect. 005 The Liquidizer

"I'M LOOKING FOR
**ABSOLUTE
SOLITUDE...**
THAT'S WHY MY
CODE NAME IS
ISOLATOR."

REKI KAWAHARA
ILLUSTRATIONS BY SHIMEJI


NEW YORK

Copyright

THE ISOLATOR Volume 5
© REKI KAWAHARA

Translation by Jenny McKeon
Cover art by Shimeji

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

ZETTAI NARU ISOLATOR Vol.5

©Reki Kawahara 2019

Edited by Dengeki Bunko

First published in Japan in 2019 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION,
Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION,
Tokyo, through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC.

English translation © 2020 by Yen Press, LLC

Yen Press, LLC supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact the publisher. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Yen On
150 West 30th Street, 19th Floor
New York, NY 10001

Visit us at yenpress.com
facebook.com/yenpress
twitter.com/yenpress
yenpress.tumblr.com

First Yen On Edition: March 2020

Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

The Yen On name and logo are trademarks of Yen Press, LLC.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Kawahara, Reki, author. | Shimeji, illustrator. | McKeon, Jenny, translator.

Title: The Isolator, realization of absolute solitude. / Reki Kawahara ; illustrations by Shimeji ; translation by Jenny McKeon.

Other titles: Zettai naru Isolator. English

Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2015–

Identifiers: LCCN 2015034584 | ISBN 9780316260596 (v. 1 : hardback) |

ISBN 9780316268899 (v. 2 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316552721

(v. 3 : hardback) | ISBN 9781975326272 (v. 4 : hardback) |

ISBN 9781975307868 (v. 5 : hardback)

Subjects: | CYAC: Orphans—Fiction. | Solitude—Fiction. | Science fiction. |

BISAC: FICTION / Science Fiction / Adventure.

Classification: LCC PZ7.K1755 It 2016 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2015034584>

ISBNs: 978-1-9753-0786-8 (hardcover)

978-1-9753-0787-5 (ebook)

E3-20200131-JV-NF-ORI

Contents

Cover

Insert

Title Page

Copyright

Sect. 005 The Liquidizer

Afterword

Yen Newsletter

Sect. 005

THE LIQUIDIZER



Sect. 005 THE LIQUIDIZER

1

“I’m home...,” Minoru muttered meekly.

But as if to make up the difference from his usual tone, two booming greetings immediately rang out from either side of him.

“Good evening!”

“Thanks for having uuus!”

As Minoru entered the hall, he was followed by a girl in a black blazer and a caramel-brown duffel coat, along with a boy wearing an identical blazer under a gray mountain parka, both high school age. Watching them as they bowed deeply with perfect posture, Minoru couldn’t help thinking they were acting nothing like their usual selves, but of course he kept that to himself.

Coming to greet them in the hall, Minoru’s adoptive sister, Norie Yoshimizu, widened her eyes in surprise for a moment, then smiled brightly.

“Welcome! I’m Mii...I mean, Minoru’s older sister, Norie. Nice to meet you.”

The other two promptly introduced themselves in return.

“The pleasure is all ours. I’m Yumiko Azu, a first-year at Kousai Metropolitan High. Thank you so much for having us today.”

“Hello. I’m Olivier Saito, a second-year at Kousai. I’m not sure if this will be to your liking, but you’re more than welcome to it.”

Olivier held out a paper bag from a Western-style bakery with both hands, and Norie accepted it, looking genuinely apologetic.

“I’m sorry! You didn’t have to go to any trouble for me. Now, please come in. You can hang your coats right there.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“Thank you!”

The pair promptly did as told. Minoru took the garments and hung them up alongside his own using the hangers in the corner.

As they followed Norie down the hall and into the living room, the scent of cream stew tantalized their empty bellies. Olivier clutched his stomach and almost said something, but Yumiko silenced him with a sharp nudge. Fortunately, Norie didn’t notice the Accelerator’s

speedy reaction as she donned an apron that was hanging off the back of a chair.

"Lunch will be ready soon, so feel free to watch TV while you wait."

As she started to head into the kitchen with the paper bag, Yumiko hopped forward. "Please let me help you."

Of course, the two boys couldn't let her show them up. Minoru and Olivier gallantly threw their hats into the ring:

"I'll help, too, Norie."

"Oh, uh, me too."

However, Norie just chuckled and held up her hands. "My kitchen's not big enough for four people. You boys can help with the cleanup instead, so just wait out here for now."

Unable to protest against a direct order from a superior, Olivier and Minoru exchanged glances, then stayed behind in the living room. As they sat down on the sofa, the Divider let out a sigh and returned to his usual demeanor.

"Got any games, Mikkun?"

"Erm...yes, although they're not exactly the latest consoles. I've got one from two generations ago, but we don't use it that much."

"You should play while you can, dude. Once you're a second-year, entrance exams will be on you before you know it."

Olivier himself was a second-year already and would be a third-year in a scant three months. Minoru gazed at his handsome half-Japanese, half-French features as he posed a question in a small voice.

"Are you going to college, Oli-V?"

"Ehhh, haven't decided."

"H-haven't decided...? Won't you be a third-year soon?"

"Well, yeah, but..." Adjusting the blue polyamide frame of his glasses, Olivier spoke in a low voice for a moment. "Those black balls that live inside us are aliens, y'know? So there could totally be other alien life-forms and monsters and junk out there, too. If they ever attack in full force and put Earth, all of Earth, in danger...what's the point of studying and going to college?"

"...Why did you say 'Earth' twice?" Minoru wasn't sure how serious Olivier was being, so that was his only response at first, but Olivier just shrugged dramatically. Eventually, Minoru ventured a different question. "So, erm...by that logic, doesn't that mean our current duties are pointless, too? It won't matter how many Ruby Eyes we neutralize if aliens from the planet such-and-such destroy Earth with a giant laser beam."

"Nahhhh, that's not true." Olivier winked back. "You got your paycheck for last month, right? That's enough to keep us entertained until Earth is destroyed, at least. You could cover your bed in ten-

thousand-yen bills and roll around on it or something.”

“...The Professor said the same thing.”

Suppressing a sigh, Minoru glanced at Olivier again. His careless attitude wasn't how he really felt, of course. Minoru knew that the Divider was fighting not for money but for a more personal reason—something deeply connected to Ryu Mikawa, the Trancer, who'd been captured two days ago.

Trancer was currently being held on the eleventh floor of the National Center of Advanced Health and Medicine, aka the NCAM, which wasn't far from SFD Headquarters. SFD policy said that as a red Third Eye holder, he should immediately have his Third Eye removed and his related memories erased, as they'd done with Igniter, but as of now, 12:00 noon on January 5, they had yet to perform the operation.

Olivier insisted to Professor Riri Isa that he wanted to be present for Trancer's operation. If he had his way, he would probably be waiting impatiently at SFD Headquarters that very moment, but Yumiko had dragged him out for today's "mission" at the Utsugi household. He had agreed on the condition that Yumiko would bring him back on her bike immediately if there was any word from NCAM, but Minoru hoped they could at least relax through mealtime.

“Lunch is ready!”

Olivier hopped to his feet at the sound of Norie's voice, as if he couldn't wait another second.

The dining room table was lined with bowls of cream stew, one of Norie's best dishes, as well as mesclun salads. Yumiko stood to one side, a bread knife in one hand and a rice scoop in the other.

“Oli... Erm, Saito and Utsugi, would you prefer baguettes or rice?”

“‘Saito’? Really?” Olivier muttered under his breath, but he soon responded with a bright “Rice, please!” which allowed Minoru to mumble the same without feeling too embarrassed. Yumiko nodded, then called to Norie in the kitchen.

“Rice for all three of us, please, my lady!”

“*My lady*”? *Are you serious*? Minoru thought, but he bit his tongue.

“Okaaaay!” Norie called back, followed by the sound of a rice cooker clicking open.

Yumiko headed into the kitchen and soon returned with a square tray. On the tray were three fancy Kasama-ware bowls containing piping-hot white rice. Looking closely, Minoru noticed that the stew was in matching Kasama-ware dishes, while the salad was served in wooden bowls; Norie must have somehow suspected from the start that the high schoolers would choose rice, not bread.

Two of the servings were particularly large, and Yumiko placed those in front of Olivier and Minoru. As a fellow Third Eye holder, the intense rate at which she burned calories was just as high as theirs,

which almost made them say *You should get some more, Yumiko*, but she was probably holding back to ensure their mission went well.

Once the others had all sat down, Norie removed her apron and took the seat next to Yumiko. The last time this four-person dining room table had been full was when Mr. Yoshimizu, Norie's father and Minoru's grand-uncle, was still alive.

"Go on, dig in!"

At Norie's prompting, the three gave a chorus of "Thank you!" and picked up their wooden spoons.

Instead of the usual poultry, the Yoshimizu family's cream stew recipe was made with ham. The large pieces of meat looked tough at first glance, but they had actually been simmered so well that they came apart easily with the press of a spoon. And in addition to the usual potatoes, carrots, and mushrooms, this recipe also included seasonal vegetables like brussels sprouts, broccoli, asparagus, and turnips. This made it look like a Western-style dish, but it included just enough Japanese flavors that it paired with rice beautifully.

The two boys dug into the stew with vigor, but Yumiko tasted hers primly before turning to Norie.

"Might I ask what the secret ingredient is, my lady?"

Norie responded with a mischievous grin.

"There are three secret spices, but the recipe has been handed down through my family for generations, so I can only tell Mii's future bride."

Minoru nearly choked on his stew, but he managed to get through it somehow. Unfortunately for him, though, Norie wasn't done speaking.

"I'd be happy to let you in on the secret if you were his bride, Yumiko, but it seems like you might have some competition. Like that young lady Komura who came over the other day, or Mii's schoolmate Minowa..."

"N-Norie!" Minoru couldn't help exclaiming.

Next to him, Olivier snorted loudly. But Yumiko displayed terrifying resolve, managing to respond with a straight face.

"Is that so, my lady? I know of at least one other girl who seems quite close with Minoru in our circle, too. She's only in elementary school, though."

"Oh my...!"

As Norie's eyes widened, Minoru could only despair in silence that their mission was clearly doomed to failure.

The meal proceeded more or less peacefully after that, followed by coffee and the puddings Olivier had provided (which he'd procured at the nearest patisserie to SFD Headquarters). After the two boys

cleaned up, the three of them thanked their host for the delicious meal and then went up to Minoru's room.

The instant the door closed, Olivier caught Minoru in a headlock and noogied him.

"Damn, Master Mikkun. Can't take our eyes off you for a second, can we?"

"I-it's fine even if you do! Also, that actually really hurts!"

"I dunno, dude. I think I'm gonna have to tell Komusho about this one..."

"Komusho" was a nickname for the Spectator, Shou Komura, older brother of the Refractor, Suu Komura. One of the female anime figurines that served as his viewing terminals was placed on the control box of a utility pole in front of Minoru's house, so if Olivier shouted something out the window, it really would reach Suu's brother.

"P-please don't! There's nothing between Suu and me, not at all!"

"Of course there isn't," Yumiko agreed, staring at the bookshelf. "And there's no reason that she's the only person you can bring into your barrier, too, I'm sure."

Judging that it would be dangerous to stay on this topic for much longer, Minoru hurriedly said, "M-more importantly, you two haven't finished your winter break homework yet, right? That was technically the goal today, so we should get right to work..."

Freeing himself from Olivier's grasp, Minoru set out some cushions around the low table in the center of the room. His two guests looked reluctant, but they obediently sat down and produced some workbooks from their bags.

"Bet the Professor could finish this whole book in five minutes flat...", Olivier grumbled as he opened his English workbook.

"You're not good at English, even though you're half?" Yumiko asked, posing a characteristically blunt question.

"It's not nice to assume, Yukko. I'm half-French, not -English, remember?"

"So you can speak French, then?"

"Nah, not at all."

"What a waste of space."

Mercilessly dismissing him, Yumiko opened her math book. After looking at it for all of two seconds, she glanced up at Minoru.

"Utsugi, show me how to do this one."

"Ah...um, okay."

"How are you any better than me?" Olivier muttered as Minoru leaned forward, but Yumiko shut him up with a glare.

Minoru's high school, Yoshiki High School in Saitama, was a top-class college-prep school, but Olivier and Yumiko's school, Kousai

Metropolitan, boasted a respectable standard test score of seventy. As Minoru expected, the question Yumiko pointed at was a difficult higher-degree equation, but he summoned up all his knowledge and inspiration to answer it as best he could.

“So first, try using synthetic division to get $x - 1$ as the left side of the equation...”

“Right, right.”

While Minoru was watching Yumiko write out neat, precise digits with her mechanical pencil, Olivier started demanding help from his other side.

“Hey, Mikkun, what does this mean? ‘I only see Bob once in a blue moon.’”

“Huh? ...Oh, ‘once in a blue moon’ is an idiom. It means ‘very rarely’ or ‘hardly ever.’”

“Oh-ho, I see.”

As Olivier started writing his translation, Yumiko tugged Minoru’s sleeve.

“All right, I did the synthetic division.”

“Okay, um, you ended up with a remainder of zero, right? So now you just do the factorization with this formula...”

“Ah, so that’s how you solve it. I see now...”

Yumiko seemed to have a strong grasp of basic calculations; she quickly started solving the equation. Plus, Olivier was finally starting to focus, so Minoru backed away a little, leaning against his bed and breathing a small sigh of relief.

Accelerator and Divider really had come over his house to finish their homework, which was how he’d explained it to Norie, but there was actually a hidden objective behind this mission. However, the target in this case wasn’t a Ruby Eye but Minoru himself. The goal was so that he could explain to his legal guardian why he’d been coming home so late and going out so frequently this past month, as truthfully as possible.

During lunch, Yumiko and Olivier had told Norie that they were members of a student-run community service organization. Their cover story went that they had met Minoru while they were cleaning up around Akigase Park, and they had invited him to join. Fighting the Ruby Eyes certainly was a form of community service in a way, and he really had first met Yumiko in Akigase Park, so it wasn’t entirely made-up, although he couldn’t deny that they were still deceiving her. But of course, it wasn’t like they could explain that Minoru was putting his life on the line in fierce urban combat.

When Minoru had joined the SFD, it was on the condition that once the battle against the Ruby Eyes was over, Chief Himi would erase Minoru from the memories of everyone who knew him. That

included Norie, of course. As soon as all the Ruby Eyes were gone from Japan, assuming Minoru was still alive, then Chief Himi would fulfill that promise—and Norie would forget all about the adopted brother she'd lived with for the past eight years.

It was better that way. Norie was turning thirty-two this year, and the fact that she had been single all this time was probably because she was prioritizing her duties as Minoru's guardian. Leaving would ease her financial burden, too, and more importantly, Norie would be able to live for her own happiness. The fact that he'd lied to her yet again today would be canceled out, along with Minoru's own existence...

"Having negative thoughts again, are we?"

Raising his head at the unexpected voice, Minoru saw that Yumiko was right in front of him, peering into his face. Instinctively, Minoru shook his head.

"N...no, not particularly..."

"You always rub your fingertips when you're lost in thought. Like this." Yumiko rubbed her right thumb and middle finger together.

"What? I do not..." Minoru balked, but when he imitated her action with his own hand, it felt all too familiar.

As he fell into a sheepish silence, Yumiko's expression softened for just a moment.

"I'm sure you're feeling bad about lying to your sister, but someday you'll be able to explain yourself and apologize for it... probably. So there's no point worrying about it right now."

"Someday'... When are you referring to, exactly?"

"Once we've wiped out every last Ruby Eye."

"....."

Minoru had been thinking about the same thing less than a minute earlier, but their conclusions were completely different. Yumiko's suggestion that he tell her the truth and apologize was obviously the "right" thing to do, but Minoru couldn't change his path now. The reason he fought as a Jet Eye was so that he could live in a world where not a single soul knew him, a world of absolute solitude and isolation.

Yumiko knew this, too, but instead of pushing him about it as she usually did, she just sat back.

"...Although, if Ruby Eyes keep popping up one after another like this, that day probably won't come for quite a while."

Minoru was relieved that she'd changed the subject.

"We still don't know what Stinger is up to, do we?" he asked.

Immediately, Yumiko glared at him again.

"Listen, Utsugi, you and I are on the same SC level in the SFD. If you don't know, then how should I know, either?"

SC was short for *security clearance*, referring to an individual's access to information. The SFD was a small, close-knit organization, but since it was managed by the government, it still technically had to follow certain rules. Chief Himi was the only member with SC1, meaning he could access all information about the Third Eye (3E) incident; the commanding officer Professor Riri Isa was SC2, while field and combat personnel like Minoru and Yumiko were SC3.

"I guess so, but...you spend more time at headquarters than I do, so I thought maybe you might have heard some rumors or something..."

"If you would just move in and transfer to Kousai, you could be at headquarters all day long," Yumiko snapped, then composed herself. "...As far as I've heard, there's no information whatsoever. DD hasn't picked up on any scents, and Public Security can't seem to find a trace of him, either."

"I see..."

It had already been two days since the escape of Stinger, the most mysterious Ruby Eye who Minoru—no, the entire SFD—had yet encountered. In Ota and Shinagawa Ward's Ooi Futo Park, Stinger had simultaneously taken on Minoru, Yumiko, Trancer, and even Liquidizer, who was considered the strongest known Ruby Eye. Yet, Trancer and Liquidizer sustained serious injuries, Trancer's being near-fatal, and even when Minoru's last-resort "barrier burst" move severed his right leg at the knee, the Ruby Eye still managed to get away. And he'd done so with the inhuman feat of flying with his own wings.

Even he probably couldn't jump back into action so quickly with one of his legs gone, but after one of his minuscule, hyper-explosive insects had nearly blown up Minoru's carotid artery, he couldn't afford to be that optimistic about Stinger.

"...I wonder if they were able to find out anything from that leg he left..."

Yumiko shrugged. "They're analyzing it thoroughly at NCAM, but considering it's been two days and we haven't heard anything, I doubt we should get our hopes up."

"Hey, Mikkun."

Surprised to hear his name, Minoru looked to his right. Olivier was frowning, spinning a mechanical pencil skillfully between his fingertips as he spoke.

"That Stinger guy said something before he took off, right? Something about coming back for his leg?"

"Yes... Well, his exact words were *I'll be back for you soon*, so I'm not sure what he was referring to."

"Doesn't that mean he might attack NCAM again, then?"

“.....” Yumiko and Minoru exchanged glances.

If Stinger really had meant that he planned to take his leg back, then his only option would be to break into NCAM. But the eleventh floor, where his leg was being analyzed, had essentially been turned into a fortress to contain captured Third Eyes. It was protected by machine guns, high-voltage currents, and incapacitating gas, and that was just what Minoru knew about; even Liquidizer evidently hadn’t been able to break in. When he fixed up Minoru’s right hand, Dr. Satoru Nitamizu had smiled and said, *You might be the only person who could get past our security system, young Utsugi.*

“...Stinger was able to survive a nine-mil bullet, Trancer’s ice bombs, and even Liquidizer’s liquefaction,” Minoru noted, “but still, his attack power is only suited to fighting other people. He can’t just bust through NCAM’s doors and walls, right?”

At this, Olivier stopped the pencil he’d been spinning in his right hand. “Yeah, he probably couldn’t break in head-on. At the same time...”

The mechanical pencil spun one more time, then disappeared like smoke. Showing Minoru his now-empty hands, Olivier continued gravely, “There are plenty of Ruby Eyes who can pull off things that seem like magic tricks. That Liquidizer woman manipulates intermolecular forces, so it wouldn’t surprise me one bit if someone showed up and walked right through a thick concrete wall or whatever. For all we know, Stinger already could be working with someone like that, yeah?”

“I...I suppose so, but wait...” Unable to resist his curiosity, Minoru totally derailed. “First of all, where did the pencil go?”

With a straight face, Olivier reached out with his right hand into the hood of the sweatshirt Minoru was wearing. Then he withdrew his fingers again, which were now holding a mechanical pencil the same color as his glasses. As Minoru’s eyes widened again, Yumiko sighed loudly.

“The pencil was up his sleeve, all right? That’s Olivier’s only trick. If you act that impressed, he’ll just keep doing it until it drives you insane.”

“Hey, c’mon now, Yukko! I’ll have you know that I’m working on a new trick right this very moment.”

“And I’m waiting with bated breath, I assure you. At any rate... you’re right that Third Eye holders can have an infinite range of possible powers, but there’s no point letting your imagination run too wild. Otherwise, you’d have to worry about someone whose power can destroy the earth in a single blow or something like that. All we can do—no, what we *must* do—is chase down and apprehend the Ruby Eyes we’ve already identified. Leave the guesses and

hypotheticals to the people in charge.”

All that being said, Yumiko then let out another little sigh. “... Although, I don’t quite know how much we can actually trust the people in charge...the government’s so-called 3E Committee.”

Minoru had heard the committee’s name a few times now, but he still didn’t know that much about it, so he decided this was his chance to ask. “Who exactly is involved with that committee anyway?”

Yumiko and Olivier looked at each other for a moment, then shrugged in unison.

“Even Professor Riri doesn’t know who the members of the committee are,” Yumiko noted. “I doubt even Chief Himi has the full picture, and he’s got SC1.”

“What...? Does that mean there’s a level of clearance higher than SC1?”

“Most likely, even if it’s not explicitly part of the rules,” she explained. “All kinds of nasty businessmen and politicians have latched on to the Third Eye incident, and they’re all trying to confuse and trip one another up. That’s why the existence of Ruby Eyes still hasn’t even been made public. I think it’s about time to stop hiding it, if you ask me... Say, does this room have a TV?”

Minoru shook his head. “No, I don’t watch TV very often, so...”

“Neither do I, but it is good to at least check the news every once in a while.”

With that, Yumiko produced her smartphone from her pocket, tapped the screen a few times, then stood the phone up against her pencil case on the table. It seemed to be a commercial broadcasting news station; a female newscaster’s level voice spoke over the backdrop of savagely destroyed buildings.

“Regarding the police department’s Special Assault Team’s raid on a private warehouse on Keihinjima in Ota Ward, which took place the night of New Year’s Eve, Chief Cabinet Secretary Matsukubo stated at a press conference on January fourth that multiple heavy firearms, including a rocket launcher, were discovered inside the warehouse. The chief cabinet secretary stated that the warehouse was a base for a radical military organization. It is strongly suspected by authorities that they were plotting to attack airplanes taking off or landing at Haneda Airport, which the police department says justified the operation. No information was released at the press conference regarding the potential number of casualties, citing a matter of national security.”

“...The police department?” Minoru looked at Yumiko. “Wasn’t it the Self-Defense Force’s Special Task Squad that stormed the warehouse on Keihinjima? Why...?”

“It’s called media manipulation, dude.”

Olivier frowned. “As a general rule, the Self-Defense Force is only

supposed to act if the prime minister orders a public security or defense operation, with the approval of the National Diet. Whether the enemy is a terrorist group or humongous alien monsters, it doesn't matter. But there hasn't actually been a single official public security or defense operation since the Self-Defense Force was formed. If it came out that the Special Task Squad was opening fire in the middle of the city without an official order from the minister, the public and the National Diet would both riot, meaning the whole cabinet would be forced to resign."

"...So they're saying it was the police department's Special Assault Team because they can't say that it was the Self-Defense Force? But why the rocket launcher...?"

"That's most likely a fabrication, too," Yumiko said. "As far as I've heard, all they found in that warehouse were some ordinary appliances and a few laptops."

Olivier spread his arms wide. "Yeah, there's no way some rando group could get a hold of rocket launchers in Japan that easily. This isn't a *Grand Theft Ammo* game."

"....."

Minoru wasn't sure what Olivier was referring to, but it was probably the title of a game or something, so he quickly moved along. "But all six members of the STS team in that operation were killed by Stinger. They must have had families... So pretending the operation never even happened seems pretty awful, not to mention difficult..."

"That's exactly what they plan to do, I'm sure. After a few days, they'll probably announce that there was a plane crash during a Self-Defense Force training exercise that resulted in the deaths of six people or something along those lines... Ridiculous, isn't it? The helicopter the SAT uses is the Bell 412 EP model. It doesn't look anything like the Blackhawk the STS used for the operation on New Year's Eve."

Minoru stared blankly at the table. "...But that's so....."

The day before yesterday, he'd asked Professor Riri to tell him the names of the six people who were killed by Stinger's poison. Their leader was First Lieutenant Nakaoka, and the team members were Sergeant Major Yarai, Sergeant Major Tomita, Sergeant First Class Omi, Sergeant First Class Nojima, and Sergeant Maki. They had all been drawn from the Ranger Corps or the Special Task Squad, and none of them had black Third Eyes like Minoru and the other SFD members. They had been wearing special, highly advanced combat suits, but ultimately, they were ordinary people who went into battle against a Ruby Eye—Stinger, the strongest known Third Eye user yet—to protect innocent citizens, and they lost their lives in the battle. To be exact, they'd fallen prey to the deadly "spinebugs" Stinger had

created before the battle could even begin.

And now, not even their blood relatives would know the truth behind their final moments? If the safety of the citizens was really the top priority here, wouldn't it be better to formally release all the information the SFD had found about the Third Eyes over the past ten months, sooner or later? Certainly, it would probably plunge society and the economy into chaos, but there were ways to identify Ruby Eyes and to "cure" them. If warnings were spread around, surely the number of victims would decrease. And yet, the 3E Committee was continuing to keep such vital information to themselves for ridiculous reasons like infighting among various government agencies and departments... Was it really right to leave them in charge of everything?

"...It's not just the STS, either."

Yumiko spoke as if she'd read Minoru's thoughts.

"Not just them? What do you mean...?"

"We in the SFD are handled the same way. If you or I was killed in battle against a Ruby, they wouldn't tell my family or Ms. Norie the truth...certainly not officially anyway. I don't think it's right, either, but we have no choice but to go along with it for now. There are forces in the 3E Committee who view Jet Eyes as dangerous, too, not just Ruby Eyes. If we do anything to seem like we're bucking their control, they might declare that Jet Eyes need to have their Third Eyes removed as well."

"What? But who would fight the Ruby Eyes then...?"

"That's probably why they formed the Special Task Squad. They've been recruiting non-Third Eye users...ordinary people, not just Jet Eyes like Nishikida and Kakinari, who we met at the nuclear power plant in Tokyo Bay."

Minoru processed Yumiko's explanation for a few seconds before he responded.

"You mean...the STS was originally formed to fight Ruby Eyes without needing to rely on Third Eye users' powers?"

"I think that's safe to assume, yes... The Professor has been a bit depressed since the beginning of the year, don't you think?"

"Huh? Sh-she has?"

Minoru blinked in surprise, thinking back. When he'd gone to SFD Headquarters the day before yesterday, and the Professor made him put the *kotatsu* together, she'd sat down next to him. It had occurred to him that she'd been unusually physical with him that day, but he hadn't realized it might be a sign she was depressed. But even so, why would she be?

He looked back at Yumiko, who was twirling a strand of her long, straight hair around her fingertip.

“This is just a guess,” she began, “but I think the Professor might not have known that the STS was going to send a team of regular humans to the Keihinjima warehouse. That day, she’d sent the data you and Komura got from the Syndicate hideout over to the STS. It was that information that led them to dispatch a team in high-tech combat suits to attack the place. But Stinger’s spinebugs were able to get in through the ventilation slits in the suits, so all of them were killed...”

“But... But that’s not the Professor’s fault, is it?”

“Of course not. But I wouldn’t be surprised if the Professor thinks she should have realized what the STS—no, what the person in charge of the STS—intended to do. That person likely thought the battle on New Year’s Eve showed that they could handle Ruby Eyes without any Jet Eye involvement, and they intended to use this assault to prove that the SFD is unnecessary. But that eagerness backfired and led to six elite members of the Self-Defense Force being killed in action... The Professor has the ability to solve any question as long as she has all the information, right? So she probably feels that if she’d just thought about it a little more, she might have been able to prevent that tragedy.”

“But that’s... Why would she...?”

Minoru was at a loss for words. After a moment of silence, Olivier spoke up instead.

“It’s ‘cause that kid has a bad habit of trying to shoulder everything all by herself.”

Lacing his fingers behind his head, he stared up at the winter sky through the window. The dim white sunshine reflected off his glasses, obscuring his expression.

“...I mean, yeah, the Professor’s brainpower is pretty crazy. She’s probably the only one who could rein in all of us crazy SFD members. But her job is to give directions during field operations, so what to actually do about the Third Eye incident itself is up to that 3E Committee. And since those bastards are always in some stupid power struggle, the Professor gets burdened with stuff that shouldn’t be her problem in the first place.”

His tone was quiet and calm, but Minoru could still detect a frustration behind those words that the Divider couldn’t entirely hide.

Yumiko, however, wasted no time in tossing a snide comment at him: “I guess even you say something intelligent once in a while.”

“Excuse me, everything I’ve ever said is intelligent. Right, Mikkun?”

“D-don’t look at me...” As Minoru was stalling for an answer, he suddenly thought of something. “Oh! But I did think what you said that one time was pretty wise. You know, the thing about ‘why can’t

the demon lord save, too?”

Olivier had said that to Minoru the day before the infiltration of the Syndicate hideout, so it must have been December 30. He had been playing an old role-playing game on the big-screen TV in the SFD hideout and had just turned off the console after a wrong button press caused his entire party to be wiped out. That was when he remarked that it seemed unfair that the hero, the protagonist, could die over and over and still restart from the last save point, but the demon lord couldn't do the same. So whenever his party died and he got a game over, he stopped playing that RPG for good.

Yet, when Minoru repeated his “wisdom” back to him now, Olivier smiled a little sheepishly. “Oh yeah, I guess I did say that... I dunno, though. I kinda wish you'd remembered what I said *after* that instead.”

“I do remember. Erm...” Thinking back to that moment six days ago, Minoru repeated Olivier's words almost verbatim: “‘Even if you max out your levels and prepare everything, all it takes is one moment of spacing out for you to lose everything. And at any moment, even the smallest action can turn into something that you can never take back.’ ...Right?”

Olivier blinked a few times, then grinned widely. “Damn, you've got a rock-solid memory, Mikkun. I guess guys who're aiming for Tokyo U really are on another level.”

“I—I never said I was aiming for that...”

The truth was that Minoru would be content to simply get a job without going to college, but he couldn't bring himself to say that, so he looked away and found himself making eye contact with Yumiko, who was giving him a puzzled look. Straightening up self-consciously, he timidly ventured, “Wh-what is it...?”

“...Utsugi, have you always been so...so...?”

But she didn't say any more. Shrugging, she quickly shifted back to her usual tone.

“No, it's nothing. Now, that's enough chatter. If we don't focus, we'll never finish our homework, Oli-V.”

“You're the one who started it, Yukko...”

Olivier grumbled, but he reopened his English workbook. Yumiko, too, returned her smartphone to her pocket and started attacking a new equation.

Minoru had already finished all his homework, so he quietly withdrew so that he wouldn't disrupt them, leaning against the bed and peering out the window.

The weather was a bit windy today but otherwise pleasant; feather-like cirrus clouds wafted across the light-blue sky. No doubt there were children flying kites all along the banks of the Arakawa

River. It was now 2020, the year of the Olympics, but here in this area of Saitama, at least, it was a January like any other.

Yet, somewhere under that sky, the still-mysterious Ruby Eye organization known as the Syndicate was continuing its schemes. Stinger, who'd escaped from Ooi Futo Park, seemed to be just as hostile toward the Syndicate as he was toward the SFD, but he would surely reappear once his wounds had healed.

Quietly, Minoru grazed the back of his neck with his right hand. The wound that Stinger's spinebug had caused was already closed up, but he could still feel a sensation there like a slight muscle cramp. The only reason Minoru had survived was that he happened to be wearing earphones, blocking the earhole that Stinger usually targeted. But the six fearless STS members, despite being equipped with the latest cutting-edge combat suits, fell due to the tiniest weakness, the ventilation slits in their helmets. When the spinebugs entered their ears through the opening and pierced their eardrums, in the few seconds before they exploded, how much fear and regret must those men and women have felt?

Stinger was the one who had killed those six people. But surely some of the blame for their deaths also fell on the 3E Committee and their meaningless power struggle. If there had been even one Jet Eye on the assault team...even if it wasn't an SFD member, someone like Nishikida or Kakinari might have been able to detect the spinebugs' approach with their sense of smell.

"...Yumiko?"

Minoru waited until she'd finished solving her equation to speak.

"Yes?"

"Erm...would you mind telling me the names of any 3E Committee members you might know about?"

The Accelerator blinked a few times, then shrugged lightly. "Like I said earlier, even the Professor doesn't have any confirmed information about that. But...if you're all right with conjecture, then yes, I can give you a few names."

"Yes, please."

Minoru started to sit up, but Yumiko raised her right hand and pushed his shoulder back with a finger. "This is just between us. And don't write it down or anything like that. All right?"

"R...right."

"First of all, the head of the committee is probably Prime Minister Aizaki. And there's a high probability that these other bigwigs are involved: the minister of defense; the commissioner general of the National Police Agency; the chief cabinet secretary; the minister of foreign affairs; the minister of finance; minister of economy, trade, and industry; and the minister of health, labor, and welfare, who's the

boss of the SFD. As for nongovernment officials, I'd say the head honchos of weapons manufacturers like Itsuki Heavy Industry, Hisakawa Industries, and Shikishima Machinery and a few academics as observers, perhaps."

As Yumiko rattled off names, Minoru seared them into his brain.

Technically, though, only one person's name had been given instead of their title: the ninety-ninth prime minister of Japan, Itaru Aizaki. He was a brilliant man still in his late forties, setting the record for the youngest prime minister in the post-WWII period. It had been almost two years since his appointment, but he still boasted a near 60 percent approval rating, and even Minoru, who only had about as much interest in politics as any other average high school first-year boy, could easily call to mind Prime Minister Aizaki's calm, sophisticated-looking smile.

"The prime minister is steering the 3E Committee? But the media's always saying that it's a puppet government and that he's just a figurehead and so on...", Minoru murmured.

This time, it was Olivier who answered him, not Yumiko.

"Look at it this way: If that privileged pushover of a prime minister is in charge, it would explain why the committee has no backbone. I bet the ones who're really pulling the strings are the minister of defense and the minister of HLW, who's clinging to the SFD like it's a winning lottery ticket."

"Why would the SFD be a winning lottery ticket?"

"Because old Himi, who was already working for the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare, became a Jet Eye. Aside from those two in the STS, I think the old man's the only Jet Eye who's a current government official. If he'd been in the agri ministry or the sports office or something, the SFD might've been made there instead, y'know?"

"Old man? Chief Himi doesn't seem that old to me..."

As Minoru pictured the man's sharp, militant appearance, Olivier smirked slyly.

"He's got the soul of an old man; he just doesn't look it. Besides, he's never played a single video game in his whole life, dude. A thirty-year-old Japanese man who's never once experienced a DQ or FF game? Can you believe that?"

"Don't use yourself as the baseline for normality. I'm sure there are plenty of people like that."

Yumiko rolled her eyes, then looked back at Minoru.

"Utsugi, I understand how you feel about Stinger's victims, and you're right to feel that way, but don't obsess over it too much. All we can do is try our best and focus on what's in our reach."

".....Right."

Minoru nodded. But at the same time, he couldn't help thinking that, at the very least, he wanted to extend his reach as far as he could.

With occasional help from Minoru, Yumiko and Olivier finished their math and English homework, then had dinner before going home. NCAM never contacted them, so apparently Trancer's Third Eye removal surgery wasn't being conducted today, either.

After he helped Norie clean up some more, Minoru returned to his room and opened his math textbook to start brushing up for his third semester. Usually, he was able to focus right away, but today he couldn't quite seem to commit the formulas to memory. Maybe it was because of the sweet aroma that still lingered ever so faintly in his room. With his senses sharpened by the Third Eye, he could still smell Yumiko Azu's characteristic scent even two hours after she'd left. SFD members didn't wear perfume as far as he knew, so maybe it was her shampoo; at any rate, something about it stirred up his feelings in a strange, distracting way.

Standing up, Minoru opened the window that faced the veranda. Immediately, the cuttngly cold air of the January night flooded his room afresh.

“...Try our best and focus on what's in our reach...”

Repeating Yumiko's words, Minoru looked at his right hand. Reaching out the window, he stretched it toward the stars above as far as he could, but it just reminded him how small he really was.

The heroes in the anime Minoru had watched with his sister Wakaba when they were young always fought to defend the world... the Earth, sometimes even the universe itself. Even now that he was a Third Eye host, Minoru had never seen himself as a hero, but the more he fought against the Ruby Eyes, the more powerless he felt.

In the end, am I just a single piece being moved around on someone's game board?

With that thought, he withdrew his hand and closed the window.

When he breathed in deeply to let out a sigh, the sweet aroma was gone without a trace.

The next day, Wednesday, January 6, 2020.

Yoshiki High School in Saitama had slightly shorter winter vacations than average, so the third semester was already beginning. Norie was going back to work, too, so after Minoru's usual morning run, he helped prepare breakfast and clean up after the meal before leaving for school.

Like the day before, the weather was beautiful, but the northern breeze from the other side of the Arakawa River was getting cold. Pulling his scarf tighter, Minoru got onto his bicycle. The thought did occur to him to run the nearly four kilometers to school, but since he wasn't even on the track-and-field team, doing something like that would probably attract more attention than he wanted to deal with.

Speaking of things Minoru didn't want to deal with, he really had to figure out what to do with the thick envelope he'd shoved into the drawer of the desk in his room.

The envelope contained two hundred thirty-three 10,000-yen bills, four 1,000-yen bills, and two 100-yen coins. In other words, a total of ¥2,334,200, or about US\$21,000. Of course, they weren't forged or stolen bills. This was Minoru's paycheck from the SFD for the month of December. According to SFD member standards, he'd received bonuses for neutralizing the Ruby Eyes Biter and Igniter, participating in the Syndicate hideout reconnaissance mission, and more, including a reward for retrieving the autonomous probe robot Muser from Reactor One at the Tokyo Bay Nuclear Power Plant. So his future pay envelopes were likely to be a lot thinner; still, his December pay alone was more than a high school first-year like Minoru could reasonably spend.

Just leaving it in his room was stressful enough, so he wanted to put it into his bank account as soon as possible. But Norie would be more than alarmed if she caught a glimpse of his bankbook, and it would probably seem suspicious for a high school kid to bring more than two million yen to the bank in the first place. The Professor said they could make him a private bank account for direct deposit at the end of January, but he couldn't bear to wait around that long.

"But I don't want to just blow it all, either..." Minoru mumbled to himself as he pushed the pedals against the north wind.

Yumiko had made the ridiculous suggestion that he buy a

motorcycle for commuting to SFD Headquarters. To be fair, it would certainly be faster to take the highway from Sakura Ward in Saitama City where Minoru lived to Toyama Park in Shinjuku, the location of SFD Headquarters, rather than go through several train transfers. But Minoru, who above all else wanted to avoid standing out, couldn't imagine himself riding a motorcycle. What if he happened to come across a classmate while cruising around?

What do you think full-face helmets are for, hmm?

Hearing Yumiko's exasperated voice in the back of his mind, Minoru quickly shook his head. *It's to protect you in case of an accident, not to hide your face*, he retorted to the imaginary voice, speeding up on his bike.

As he crossed National Route 17, he glanced at the enormous shopping mall on his left as he headed east toward the New Urban Center area. There was a bike lane along the left side of the road here, so it was easy to traverse.

Just as he began to catch a glimpse of the slanted roof of the Saitama Super Arena, where he'd once had a life-and-death battle against the Biter, someone called out to him.

"Ah, Utsugi!"

Hearing someone call out his name suddenly from the sidewalk, Minoru nearly squeezed the brakes. Instead, he made sure there were no other bikers behind him before he slowed down and pulled over.

Running toward him with light footsteps was a student wearing a backpack and a pea-green windbreaker over a zip-up jersey.

"Good morning!" She grinned and waved.

"Good morning, Minowa." He waved back timidly.

Minoru had finally gotten to the point where he could speak calmly with Tomomi Minowa, who was a first-year in Class Eight at Yoshiki High, but he still couldn't help being plagued by guilt when they approached each other like this. Just one month ago, Tomomi had been attacked by the Biter and rescued by Minoru, but she didn't remember any of that now—not even her conversation with Minoru at the hospital the following day. Chief Himi had used his abilities to block off all her memories pertaining to the incident.

Right before her memories were wiped, Tomomi had asked Minoru to please call out to her if he ever saw her on the banks of the Arakawa River again. And though it had happened on school grounds, not the riverbank, Minoru had kept his promise. Since then, he and Tomomi had continued to be jogging buddies. But even a month later, when the two of them were together, there were rare occasions when she would suddenly grimace, as if desperately trying to remember something that would never come back to her.

Those side effects would probably wear off soon enough. But if the

3E Committee wasn't so insistent on keeping information about the Third Eye incident a secret, they would never have had to seal off Tomomi's memories in the first place. Surely, a strong girl like her would have been able to overcome the fear of her encounter with Biter on her own.

After all these thoughts ran through his mind in an instant, Minoru offered, "Thank you for all the mochi from the other day. It was delicious."

"Really? You're welcome to come over to eat again sometime if you want." She smiled brightly, but then her expression changed to an apologetic one, and she clasped her hands together. "Anyway, I'm really sorry that I haven't been able to run with you the last few mornings, Utsugi."

"Huh...? No, you don't need to apologize for that at all. It's not like we specifically promised to do it or anything..." Minoru flailed his hands anxiously.

"I guess not, but still..." For some reason, Tomomi looked somewhat disgruntled.

For a little while now, they'd had a mutual agreement to run together on the banks of the Arakawa if their schedules lined up. Minoru wasn't really able to leave for his morning runs at a consistent time—especially on freezing-cold midwinter mornings—so it wasn't a strict arrangement, and they usually ended up running together only once out of every three or four days. The last time he'd run along the riverbank with Tomomi had been January 3, and today was only the sixth. It had hardly been long enough that she should feel the need to apologize, as far as Minoru was concerned.

But Tomomi's face was still unusually sorrowful as she asked, "Do you mind if we walk together and talk for a little bit?"

"Of course," Minoru responded.

Tomomi's smile returned for just a moment, and she began to walk down the right side of the sidewalk. Minoru followed suit, pushing his bike along beside him.

But for the next thirty seconds or so, Tomomi's mouth stayed firmly shut. Minoru was conflicted over whether he should prompt her or simply wait for her to start speaking, but due to his overwhelming lack of social experience, he had no idea what would be best. If he had the Professor's power, maybe he would be able to find the answer even without experience... Or maybe the power of speculation wasn't quite that convenient.

As he was mulling this over, Tomomi finally spoke up, albeit quietly. "It's just... I don't know. I've been feeling kind of strange lately."

"Strange?" Minoru repeated.

Tomomi nodded, her short hair bobbing along. "Yeah... I mean, I love running, but for some reason...it's like I don't want to run anymore."

"Huh...?"

Without thinking, Minoru glanced at her, but her face was too hidden by her bangs and collar for him to see her expression. He turned straight ahead again.

"It didn't look like that when we ran together on the third, though. You seemed like you were really enjoying yourself..."

"Yeah, um... If I manage to run a mile or two, then I start feeling a lot better. That's what happened that day, too."

As she responded, it sounded as if her usual cheerfulness had returned, but that was only for a moment. Then she sighed.

"But it's been really hard to *start* running," she continued in a quiet, shaky voice. "When I'm changing my clothes, tying my shoes, leaving the house, and all that, everything just feels so heavy that I start to consider taking the day off. Yesterday, and the day before that, too, I wound up skipping my morning run...and even on the morning when we did meet up, I'd left late because I spent such a long time just sitting on the doorstep, trying to convince myself to move."

"I had no idea..."

Minoru's thoughts churned. He went running in the morning as a personal habit, not because he was on a team, and it still required a fair amount of resolve to get himself out on a run in the morning. The same was probably true of anyone who had an exercise routine. It was tough, after all, and it was a natural reaction to not want to do something tough.

But for a great athlete like Tomomi, he had a feeling it was pretty unusual for her to avoid jogging, never mind to actually stop doing it. Normally, Minoru was able to overcome any reluctance by relying on his self-control, sense of duty, and most of all how good running actually felt. Surely it was usually the same way for Tomomi, too.

"Um...are you maybe not feeling well? Does anything hurt, or...?"

It was the first thing he could think to ask, but Tomomi quickly shook her head.

"No, I'm totally healthy. And once I get started for a bit, running feels as good as it always has. Nothing hurts, and my time hasn't really gone down, so I don't know..."

"Then...maybe you're feeling the pressure from a tournament or something...?"

"Mm...I don't think that's it, either. We don't do long-distance relay races, so our next big event isn't until April... Besides, I never really think about that stuff when I'm running."

"...I see."

Then what other reason could there be? Minoru mulled it over, but before he could make another guess, Tomomi lightly patted his hand as it gripped the bicycle handle.

“Sorry to ask you about such a weird problem, Utsugi. I’m sure it’s just a little slump, so please don’t worry.”

“O-okay...but I’m happy to listen if you ever want to talk about it. You can contact me any time at all.”

When Minoru managed to summon up those words, Tomomi smiled and nodded.

“Thanks! I think I should be fine tomorrow morning, so let’s run together if you can. In fact...maybe I’ll run the rest of the way to school! You can ride your bike.”

“Erm...”

Minoru hesitated for a moment, but it wouldn’t be easy to keep up with Tomomi’s speed while pushing his bike along. Reluctantly hopping onto the seat, he glanced over. Tomomi was still smiling as she started to run, so he rode alongside her on the right. It was technically illegal to ride a bike on the sidewalk, but if he was arrested, he could always get the 3E Committee to take care of it.

But those thoughts were just in the background as he observed his friend’s running form. There was nothing stiff or awkward about her pace, and the sound of her shoes against the pavement was as light as ever. Just as she said herself, the problem must be mental, not physical, but he couldn’t figure it out by simply watching her.

Maybe he should have pressed the matter more? But Minoru couldn’t help hesitating to let himself get any closer to Tomomi. It felt dishonest to deepen a friendship with someone who would eventually forget about him—no, be *forced* to forget.

Filling his lungs with cold air to dispel the worries that haunted him, Minoru turned forward. In the distance, the clear morning light glinted as it bounced off the silver roof of the Super Arena.

Parting ways with Tomomi once they’d passed through the gate, Minoru left his bike in the designated area and headed to first-year Class One, which was already full of twenty or so of his classmates. There were some students chatting in small groups, but most of them were at their desks quietly studying flash cards or workbooks.

One of the things that had surprised Minoru most when he entered Yoshiki High School was that there were regular classes even on the first day of the semester. The first hour-long period was taken up by an opening ceremony and homeroom, but second and third periods were normal classes before they were released after lunch. Starting the following day, of course, they would be at the school until five o’clock.

Minoru and the other first-years wouldn't have to worry about college entrance exams for a while yet, but some of the nerves from the third-years who would be taking the National Center Test next week must have rubbed off on them, because even this classroom seemed a little tense. Of course, Minoru had always been one to study alone in the morning, so he went to his seat by the window and took out his flash cards right away. However, the first card he pulled out happened to be the idiom "once in a blue moon," so he ended up thinking back to the study session from the night before.

Yumiko had struggled considerably with the higher-degree equations, but she seemed to be quite good at English; "*You should try watching Western TV shows with English subtitles or talking to native speakers. It'll help you learn much faster than silly rote memorization,*" she'd chided as she flipped through his handwritten flash cards.

I don't even know any native English speakers, Minoru grumbled in his mind as he flipped through the flash cards.

But almost immediately, a new voice disrupted his focus again. This time, it was a real voice, not one from his memories:

"Hey. Are you Utsugi?"

"Hmm?" Minoru looked up to find a student standing in the aisle to his right. He was probably a bit taller than Minoru, with cool, sharp features, his slightly long hair parted in the center to show a great deal of forehead. He looked...familiar? Not? Minoru couldn't quite tell. He hadn't really mingled with the class at all, but since it was the third semester, he at least knew most of their names and faces, so this person was probably from another class.

"...Um, yes?" Minoru nodded dubiously, and the male student tilted his handsome face to one side and stuck his hands in his pants pockets.

"Hrmm" was all he said.

What do you mean, "hrmm"? The only boy from another class who usually spoke to Minoru was Shouya Ogu from the track-and-field club, so what could Minoru have done to attract this one's attention?

Just then, a thought occurred to him, and his eyes widened. As discreetly as he could, he sucked in air through his nose.

The classroom's usual smell, a mix of floor wax and dust. The scent of perfume a few of the girls in class wore. The smell of the juice box a student was drinking nearby.

That was it. There was no trace of that distinctive, animalistic smell. In other words, the boy in front of him wasn't a Ruby Eye. The smell of the "Reds" was strongest when they were using their powers, but at this close range, he would be able to smell it regardless.

Relaxing a little, Minoru released the breath he'd been holding. The boy with the center part in his hair, evidently misinterpreting

Minoru's reaction, smiled wanly.

"Just wanted to get a look at your face. Sorry to interrupt your studies. Later."

He took his right hand out of his pocket, raising two fingers and giving them a jaunty flick next to his face. Then he strode across the classroom and vanished through the front door.

"....."

So who was that, exactly?

As Minoru stared after him blankly, the answer came in an unexpected form: Two classmates trotted over to him, their eyes sparkling as they quizzed him in turn.

"Utsugi, how do you know Hazama?!"

"Are you friends?!"

Flustered and overwhelmed, Minoru nevertheless managed a response.

"N-no, we've never spoken before..."

"Whaaat? Then why would he come to our classroom just to talk to you?"

"That's what I'd like to know."

As they conversed, he tried to remember the two girls' names. If he recalled correctly, the one whose medium-length hair flipped outward at the ends was Kojima, and the one with a short bob that was blown out to one side with hair spray that teetered on a violation of the school rules was Tomioka...at least, he was pretty sure.

For now, he looked up at Kojima. "What class is Hazama from?"

"Right next door, in Class Two."

"He's supersmart and great at English, and he even works as a mag model!" Tomioka elaborated immediately.

Minoru didn't have much interest in fashion, but even he knew that a "mag model" was an amateur model in fashion magazines. He didn't really know the details, but it was safe to assume that the job just involved putting on stylish clothes and getting your picture taken.

Each grade at Yoshiki High was divided into eight classes; Classes One and Two both specialized in math and science, while Classes Three through Eight were general education, so the former tended to have slightly higher standard scores on those subjects. It was difficult enough to keep up with the specialized classes as it was, so Minoru had to respect anyone who could work as a model on top of all that.

"...So by *supersmart*, you mean...?"

For some reason, Tomioka looked insulted by his hesitant question.

"You really don't *know*? His test scores are always in the top ten!"

"And on top of that, he's hot, too! Talk about being doubly blessed," Kojima added dreamily.

They were acting like a pair of smitten fangirls, but Minoru was pretty sure they both got better grades than he did. No matter how much Minoru studied, he usually ranked somewhere in the forties out of all his classmates—the math and science classes totaled eighty-six people, so he was pretty much average—while the two girls were generally in the thirties. It was hard to imagine being in the top ten.

“...So why would someone like that come to get a look at my face...?”

Minoru was mumbling to himself, but Tomioka, the one with the bob, pointed at him accusingly.

“That’s what we’re asking you!”

“I—I know, but...”

As Minoru tried to figure out what to say, there came a divine intervention.

“Hey, you girls, quit bothering Utsugi.”

Minoru stood up from his seat when he heard the voice. Turning, he saw a boy whose signature traits were an undercut—no, more like a bowl cut, really—and some absurdly square glasses. Combined with his impressive physique, he gave off a very intense impression.



“Hazama’s face isn’t really all that. Don’t you agree, Utsugi?”

Before Minoru could bring himself to agree, Kojima and Tomioka laid into him.

“Don’t even joke about that, Otabe!”

“You think you have any right to judge Hazama’s looks?!”

“Yeesh, scary!”

Otabe shrieked and hid behind Minoru. An art club member, he was...not quite a friend, but his seat was right behind Minoru’s, so they sometimes chatted about novels and such. Reluctantly, Minoru tried to talk the two girls down.

“A-all right, Kojima, Tomioka...please calm down. I’ll ask Hazama later what that was about, okay?”

“Utsugi, that nerd’s not worth protecting, you know.”

Kojima still looked wrathful, but Tomioka suddenly got an impish grin on her face, then turned to Minoru coquettishly.

“Y’know, I think I’ve actually got a teensy idea...”

“Huh...? About Hazama, you mean?”



“Uh-huh. I think maybe he wants to scout you.”

“Sc...scout me?”

Minoru had no idea what she meant, but after Kojima blinked rapidly a few times, she clapped her hands together.

“Ah...! You might be onto something there!”

“Riiiiight?!”

Minoru watched nervously as the two girls grew strangely gleeful.

“Um, what do you mean by scouting...? I don’t really have time for sports or anything...”

“No, not for sports. For modeling, of course!” Tomioka explained.

This time, it was Minoru’s turn to blink several times.

“...Huh? A model?”

“Yeah, duh. I heard Hazama got started ’cause a model he knew invited him, too. Maybe he’s gonna ask you to be a model, too, now!”

...Whaaaaat?!

Minoru managed to keep his reaction in his head, but he could think of nothing else to say, so he just sat there dumbstruck. Even Otabe, behind him, put his hands on Minoru’s shoulders.

“Ooh, I get it. Utsugi does have that kinda aura.”

“N-no, I don’t think I do...”

In response, Otabe started rapidly rubbing his shoulders. “C’mon, don’t be modest, Utsugiii. If Hazama does recruit you, make sure you put in a good word for me, too, yeah?”

At that, Kojima’s and Tomioka’s expressions changed dramatically.

“Are you being completely serious right now, Four-Eyes?”

“Say another word, and we’ll shave off the rest of your bowl cut, got it?”

“Noooo! If you do that, I’ll just get even more handsosome!”

Just as Otabe’s fearless retort riled up the storm even further—

“Sorry, but could you please *keep it down!*”

The shout echoed, and Minoru and company quickly shut their mouths. The other groups who were chatting in the classroom fell silent, too.

Looking around, Minoru saw a male student standing up on the hallway side of the classroom. Like Otabe, he, too, wore glasses, but these were a stylish rimless frame. He was quite thin, his cheeks slightly hollow.

His name was Satoshi Tsumori, and he was another Class One student with a particularly memorable presence. On exams, he always ranked first or second in the class—which meant he usually topped the whole school and maybe even the entirety of the Saitama district—and he frequently declared he was going to pass the University of

Tokyo science major entrance exams on the first try. Perhaps relatedly, he tended to be a bit high-strung, so Minoru unconsciously made an effort not to provoke him, but he'd gotten so caught up in the unexpected events of the morning that he'd forgotten all about Tsumori's solo studies.

Even Otabe seemed to be wary of him; he quickly slid out from behind Minoru and disappeared into the back of the classroom. Kojima and Tomioka looked dissatisfied, but they simply whispered "We'll talk later" and hurried back to their desks without further protest.

This left Minoru to duck his head apologetically, to which Tsumori snorted a loud "Hmph" but returned to his seat. Feeling the tension in the room slacken, Minoru, too, sat back down. He picked up his flash cards again, but by now his ability to focus had been blown away entirely and didn't seem willing to come back.

He'd managed to get a bit of information about the student called Hazama, but it still wasn't clear why he would come to see Minoru. It didn't seem to be related to the Third Eye incident, but...it was probably best to be extra-careful, just in case. The idea that Jet Eyes and Ruby Eyes could detect each other by scent was really just an unexplained rule of thumb, so it wasn't impossible that he might be a Ruby with the ability to hide his scent. Although even then, it wouldn't explain why he would go out of his way to make contact with Minoru.

Sighing a little, Minoru picked up the flash cards one last time, determined to study properly.

The answer to the mystery came faster than expected, and once again from an unforeseen source.

In the Yoshiki High math and science course, after the usual exams at the end of each semester, there was an extra exam called the "proficiency test" that focused only on math and science (which was biology this year). The questions were usually fiendishly difficult, leaving most of the students to go into their breaks feeling sorely defeated.

These answer sheets were returned after break, in the homeroom period following the opening ceremony. When their homeroom teacher—Mr. Mano, a math teacher in his forties—entered the room, he barely greeted them before producing the sheaf of papers with a sly grin.

"All right, it's the moment you've all been waiting for—your proficiency test results."

"Uuugh..." "No thank you!" —Immediately, the classroom filled with groans. However, his next words stopped all the chatter in its

tracks.

“Before I give them back... Utsugi, stand up.”

“Huh...?”

Minoru’s eyes widened in shock as the eyes of every student in the room turned toward him. He just barely resisted the instinct to put up his protective shell.

Desperately, he tried to figure out what he could have done wrong, but nothing came to mind. Staring at the pale, teacherly face of Mr. Mano didn’t reveal anything, so he had no choice but to obey the command.

After pausing a few seconds for dramatic effect, his teacher finally continued:

“Congratulations, Utsugi. You got the highest score on the proficiency test in the entire school.”

“...Whaaa?!”

Minoru’s slightly foolish-sounding response was drowned out by the commotion from his classmates. As he stood there dazed, he was hit with even more information:

“Your rank for both subjects combined is eleventh in the school. That’s an accomplishment in itself, but what’s most impressive is that you got ninety-nine points on the biology questions, putting you at the top of the rankings. Although as your math teacher, I would’ve preferred to see that in math.”

As Mr. Mano grinned wryly, the classroom was filled with cries of admiration, followed by restrained applause.

Standing in the midst of a situation he’d never remotely experienced before, all Minoru could do was desperately fight the urge to exclaim *That can’t be right!*

But there really was no way he could’ve gotten a score like that. The math and science tests at Yoshiki High were so tough that even getting average marks was the best Minoru could manage with hours of daily studying. On top of that, the proficiency test in December had taken place just a few days after his battle against Igniter, so he definitely hadn’t been performing at his academic best. He did remember feeling like he knew a surprising number of the answers, but if asked how he could have gotten a ridiculous score like 99 percent, Minoru had no idea.

Still, he couldn’t exactly say *There must be some kind of mistake* in this situation, so he simply ducked his head, feeling as if he’d been placed on a bed of nails.

Fortunately, Mr. Mano didn’t discuss Minoru’s score any further, and he gave him a wave to indicate he could sit again. As soon as Minoru sat down in relief, Otabe prodded him in the back.

“What the hell, Ucchi? I thought we were average-grade brothers-

in-arms! You been studying behind my back?"

...*I don't think you've ever called me "Ucchi" before*, Minoru thought. He was about to tell Otabe he must have just made a bunch of lucky guesses, but Mr. Mano resumed speaking, so he hurriedly turned back around.

"One more thing. I hate to say this, but..."

The math teacher placed the answer sheets on his desk, putting his hands atop the pile as he spoke.

"I won't name names, since you'll see them when the ranking results go up anyway, but there are a few of you who have taken a big dive from the higher ranks. I know everyone has their bad days as well as good, but I wasn't happy to see some careless mistakes. Make sure you learn how to hone your focus so you don't regret it when it really counts... All right, I'll return your tests now."

As each name was called in order of their desk numbers, the scraping of chairs filled the room. Minoru was called third, so he went up, took his two answer sheets, and promptly returned to his seat—or started to, at least.

".....?"

Sensing a strangely intense glare on him, Minoru paused automatically. Looking around, his eyes met with a male student sitting on the hallway side of the room.

It was Tsumori—the same student who'd shouted at Minoru and the others when they were talking too loudly before class. His eyes glinted behind his rimless glasses as he glared openly at Minoru. He looked paler than usual, too.

Minoru quickly looked away and started walking again, but he could feel Tsumori's glare boring into his left side. It was so intense that, despite all logic, he found himself tempted to wonder if Tsumori was a Ruby Eye.

As soon as he sat back down and the piercing gaze was averted, he couldn't help sighing in relief.

Tsumori's reaction was logical but seemed like a massive overreaction, too. Tsumori had been consistently in the top three on every test since school had started, and surely there was no exception this time. Even if Minoru had taken the top spot in biology, his cumulative rank was still eleven, so there was no reason for the guy to take that much note of him.

Sighing again, Minoru looked at the answer sheets. He'd gotten an 82 on math, which was already a good score for himself, but his biology score really was 99. Curious where he'd lost the point, he scanned the sheet to find that he'd written "adenosine nonaphosphate" where he was supposed to write "adenosine triphosphate." Next to it, the biology teacher had written "No such

thing! If it weren't for this miswriting, you'd have a perfect score!"

Minoru almost smiled—but it definitely wasn't funny. Adenosine nonaphosphate couldn't be found in any biology textbook or online encyclopedia, but it most certainly did exist. Specifically, in Minoru's own body. The mysterious Third Eye parasites created ANP to give their hosts inhuman powers. But any information related to Third Eyes was a highly classified secret, so if anyone found out he'd casually written one on a test by mistake...well, he probably wouldn't be arrested, but Professor Riri would certainly be angry with him.

Privately resolving to triple-check his answers on the next test, Minoru put the two answer sheets into a clear file folder he kept in his desk and slipped that into his messenger bag.

Minoru hated attracting attention more than anything else, so he felt more bewildered than pleased about ranking so highly on a math and science test, but at least it resolved one mystery. Clearly, the student called Hazama had come to see his face not to recruit him to be a model but because of his scores. He must have somehow found out about them early and come to check out a potential rival.

Though Minoru couldn't exactly relate to that mentality, it certainly made a lot more sense than the model-scouting theory. And though he felt bad for getting Kojima and Tomioka all worked up, they probably understood now, too. Breathing a sigh of relief, Minoru slumped back against his seat, prompting Otabe to start talking to him again.

"Seriously, Ucchi, if Hazama invites you to a magazine photo shoot, you gotta tell me about it, too. I've been getting into fashion lately, so I wanna learn more about it!"

"...No, I can't imagine he's going to do that."

This answer was the best Minoru could do.

Minoru managed to get through second-period English and third-period geography without being called on by the teachers, and with that, the first day of the third semester was over.

Starting tomorrow, they would be stuck in classes until strictly 5:00 p.m., making this half-day break something precious. As Minoru left the classroom contemplating whether to study at the library to get back into school mode or maybe do some long-distance running, he noticed there was a traffic jam in the hallway.

The names of the top twenty scorers on the proficiency tests had been posted on the wall between classrooms one and two. Unlike the December end-of-semester exams, it only consisted of math and science, so people usually didn't pay particularly close attention, but this time there seemed to be a bigger crowd than usual.

Unless Mr. Mano had been mistaken, Minoru's name should be

right in the middle of the list. Since this was the first and probably last time that would ever happen, he wanted to get a look at it. But deciding to do it when nobody else was around instead, he attempted to quickly squeeze by on the other side of the hall, when suddenly...

"You're not even going to look, Utsugi?"

Hearing a cool voice behind him, Minoru turned around. Standing by the window was a handsome young man with silky hair parted down the middle—Hazama from Class Two. When his eyes met Minoru's, he smiled in a way that seemed genuine.

"The rankings are pretty interesting this time around. It might be the biggest shake-up since Yoshiki High's math and science program first started."

".....?"

When Minoru knit his brow in confusion, Hazama took a step closer and whispered, "The top-tier students who haven't wavered once since school started—mostly Tsumori from Class One and Wada and Kitanaka from Class Two—have all fallen out of the range entirely. Seems like you're the only one who's taken a huge jump up instead, Utsugi."

"...The top-tier students all went down?" Minoru murmured.

Hazama smiled a little. "That's right. There were some bad signs on the November exams, but the results this time are pretty dramatic. I heard the teachers even started a temporary committee to investigate."

Minoru wondered how Hazama knew all this, but he asked a different question instead. "I heard you were always a top-ranked student, too. Did your position change as well...?"

At that, Hazama's smile deepened a little, and he nodded toward the rankings posted in front of the throng of people.

"Why don't you see for yourself? I don't want to give you spoilers, so all I will say is, I'm looking forward to pushing each other to even greater heights. Well, see you later."

With that, Hazama gave the same two-fingered wave as before, then strolled away toward the stairs.

What in the world is going on?

Still bewildered, Minoru hesitated a moment before edging toward the circle of students. The rankings weren't printed on particularly large paper, but with his Third Eye-enhanced vision, he could easily read the list without wading into the crowd.

Reading up from the bottom, he found his own name in eleventh place, just as promised. He kept scanning toward the top. As Hazama had said, the top ten names seemed to have changed drastically from the end-of-semester exams. *So who exactly is number one in the school?*

Minoru raised his eyes. At the top of the list, printed in slightly

larger letters than the rest, was the name Akitoshi Hazama.

Pedaling through the school gates on his bike, Minoru headed not for home or the library but for Yonohonmachi Station on the Saikyou line. His encounter with Hazama had left him uncomfortable or maybe even anxious, if he was being honest; he wanted to talk about it with someone who wasn't a Yoshiki High student, and the only people he could think of were the members of the SFD.

Heading west past Cocoon City, the giant shopping mall near the school, Minoru got off his bike at the intersection and headed up the stairs to the overpass that straddled the Takasaki and Keihin-Tohoku lines. Popularly known as the "Omiya Hokosugi Bridge," it was about ten meters wide and about 180 meters long, with white arches and kousa dogwood trees that made for an enjoyable view while walking across it.

This bridge was just about the only way to get from the west side of the railway tracks to Yoshiki High, so Minoru had been crossing it every morning and evening for the better part of the year, but it was still perhaps his favorite part of the trip. Best of all was the view on the way home in the evening, when you could see the Super Arena towering against the backdrop of the twilight sky. Although the building was now tainted in Minoru's memory by the vicious battle against Biter, he still thought the arena looked beautiful from the bridge.

Gazing at the silver spaceship-like building now, Minoru was just approaching the observation area in the middle of the bridge when he suddenly froze. A faint scent on the cold north wind assailed his nostrils. Metallic, animalistic, this smell could only be—

".....!"

Minoru let go of his bike and jumped back, right at the handrails of the bridge. His bike fell over with a *clang*; the other passersby all turned toward him at once and gave him a strange look as he stood there in a guarded stance.

Slowly, the pedestrians resumed walking.

All except one.

The figure was standing on the other side of the dogwood tree in the middle of the bridge, leaning against the handrail on the opposite side. A little shorter than Minoru, the person wore a long coat with the hood pulled down low, obscuring any facial features.

A Ruby Eye in a hooded coat.

Stinger.

As the code name flashed across his mind, Minoru quickly inhaled and activated his “shell.” All the noises and the chill of the north wind vanished, replaced only by a deep, distant, rhythmic sound. His body floated barely an inch above the ground, and his view of the world was tinted blue.

Although the shell was invisible to others, it was still risky to use his Third Eye ability when so many people were around. But he had no time to hesitate. If one of Stinger’s “spinebugs” entered his body, it would be virtually impossible to get it out on his own.

His shell still active, Minoru looked down at the feet of the figure who appeared to be Stinger. As the coat fluttered in the breeze, he could see two slim legs underneath. Even a Ruby probably couldn’t regrow a torn-off leg, so it was probably a prosthetic, but it was impossible to tell just by looking at it. But—if he was appearing before Minoru again a mere three days later, had the objective of his curse really referred to his leg? It seemed pretty obvious that Minoru wouldn’t simply be walking around with it. So what was Stinger doing here...?

As Minoru’s thoughts raced, the figure in the coat moved. The Ruby Eye walked straight through the soundless world toward him.

Terror and uncertainty sprang to life in equal measure. Stinger’s three abilities—spinebugs, missilebugs, and wireworms—were all long-distance attacks, so there was no reason for him to approach an enemy who wasn’t already unconscious.

And there was something else. It was hard to tell through the faint blue filter, but this person’s coat seemed to be a different color from before. Stinger always wore a bloodred coat that was actually an artificial living thing itself, but this person’s coat looked to be a dark gray.

Still, Minoru couldn’t let his guard down. If this person kept walking toward him, he would have to prepare to use the only attack that had worked on Stinger—grabbing the opponent with his shell still active and making it “burst.”

Minoru steadied his legs, raising his hands ever so slightly.

At around the same moment, the person in the coat stopped about two meters away and made a completely unexpected move: raising a hand covered by an extra-thick skiing glove and lowering their hood.

“Ah...?!”

Minoru couldn’t help exclaiming. And yet, he simply stared at the other person’s face.

This probably—no, *definitely*—wasn’t Stinger. With big, black-framed glasses and hair tied back in two plain pigtails, she appeared to be nothing more than a high school student.

But he still couldn't relax his guard—quite the opposite. The person in front of him might be even more dangerous than Stinger. She was considered the most powerful known Ruby Eye, an executive in the enemy organization “Syndicate”: the Liquidizer.

Liquidizer, who sometimes appeared as a meek high school girl and sometimes a glamorous businesswoman, was now staring back at Minoru as her pigtails swayed in the cold breeze. Her fingerless-gloved hands were hanging loosely at her sides, so she didn't look like she was going to attack, but a powerful opponent like her could probably shift from casual standing to combat mode in less than a second.

But at the moment, they were in a stalemate regardless. Liquidizer's terrifying power, which could turn any solid or semisolid matter—including the human body—into liquid, couldn't liquefy Minoru's shell. Liquidizer knew that, too, so why would she show herself to him like this?

...A diversion? Was there a Ruby Eye hiding nearby who could break through his shell?

Guessing intuitively that a surprise attack was coming, Minoru thought he should run or maybe even jump over the handrail and down onto the tracks. But before he could do either, Liquidizer opened her mouth.

She seemed to know he wouldn't be able to hear her, so instead she moved her lips in slow, exaggerated motions. Minoru wasn't a particularly good lip reader, but after the second time, he managed to figure out what words she was mouthing.

I...want...to...talk.

I want to talk.

“...Talk?”

Minoru stared in shock for a moment, then quickly glanced to his left and right. There didn't seem to be anyone in the immediate area who was going to ambush him. He looked back at Liquidizer doubtfully.

“What could you want to talk about now...?” he murmured.

In Minami-Aoyama, Liquidizer had tried to kill all of the SFD members present, himself included. During the Stinger incident in Ooi Futo Park three days ago, they'd been reluctantly fighting on the same team, but that didn't change anything about their positions. Ruby Eyes killed humans, and Jet Eyes stopped them. The absolute nature of their opposed goals wasn't something that could be resolved by talking it out. It had taken over a month for Minoru to finally realize this.

But now Liquidizer gazed into his face, as if she were seeing right through him, anger and all. Then she moved her mouth again.

Please.

“.....”

Minoru gritted his teeth, struggling to regain his composure.

There was still a very high probability that this was a trap. But Minoru did have one question he wanted—no, *had*—to ask Liquidizer, too: How had she known to wait here for him? If the Syndicate knew what school he went to and even where he lived, then he had to put Norie in the SFD’s protection immediately.

Making up his mind, Minoru rummaged in the pocket of his Chesterfield coat. Then he produced a set of visible light communication wireless earphones, along with the matching speaker/mic, specially made by the SFD. He put one of the earphones in his right ear, looked around carefully again, then lowered his shell just long enough to place the mic at his feet. A two-centimeter-wide disc attached to a black band, it looked like nothing more than a wristwatch at a glance. Once he’d reactivated his shell, he nudged it with his foot so that it slid across the tile floor.

Minoru waited for the woman to pick up the mic with a gloved hand, then spoke.

“What’s this about?”

The microphone inside the earphone converted his voice into a light signal, then beamed it out through a transparent cylindrical LED. Then the mic Liquidizer held received the signal, converted it back into sound, and played it back.

Liquidizer raised an eyebrow for a moment, then held the mic up to her lips. Minoru heard her level voice in his ear, with a slight wet echo.

“Could we go somewhere else first, please? We stand out far too much here. Especially with this mic flashing like mad.”

The blinking light was inevitable due to the nature of the earphone and mic set, but he couldn’t deny that it drew attention. There would probably be more passersby soon, which would likely include Yoshiki High students, and therefore students who might know Minoru. In the worst-case scenario, Tomomi Minowa might even pass by and try to say hello.

“...All right. But I choose the place.”

“Of course.”

Liquidizer nodded. Minoru paused for a moment.

“Also, you’ll have to carry my bike. It’s difficult to hold on to it while I’m in my shell.”

“...Oh, very well.”

Liquidizer shrugged, clipped the mic’s band around her left wrist under her mod coat, and picked up Minoru’s bike where it still lay on the floor.

“So where are we going?”

“.....”

Despite his strong declaration that he would choose the place, Minoru couldn't immediately think of anywhere in the heart of the Saitama New Urban Center where nobody else would go. He thought hard for a moment, until he finally came up with a suitable spot.

“...This way.”

Minoru started walking, and Liquidizer fell in step alongside him, pushing his bike. Minoru started to wonder how they must look to the people around them...but he quickly cut off that line of thinking. This was still a hypertense situation. He couldn't afford to be distracted by meandering thoughts.

Minoru had chosen an outdoor deck behind the Super Arena. The main entrance side was connected to a commerce center called “Keyaki Hiroba,” so it was usually crowded, but there was nothing in back, so few people would bother going there.

They went down from the Hokosugi Bridge, parked Minoru's bike on the sidewalk, and went up the stairs leading to the back of the Super Arena. As he'd expected, the deck here was deserted, with no one else in sight.

“I see. An ideal spot for a private conversation, or a date.”

Liquidizer smiled as she looked around the greenery on the deck, but Minoru wasn't about to let her shake him.

“If you're just going to joke around, I'd like you to answer a question for me first.”

“...All right.”

Liquidizer nodded, and Minoru stared at her intently.

“How did you know I was going to be on that bridge?”

“Yes, I can see why that would alarm you. But don't worry. I don't know any personal information about you whatsoever.”

“Then how...?”

“The answer is right here.”

Liquidizer pointed at the wall of the Super Arena that rose above the south side of the deck.

“One month ago, the Ruby Eye ‘Biter’ died right here. Now, I personally had no interest in the man, but the cause of his death was a head injury and severe burns. Specifically, his entire head blew off, and his entire body was doused in gasoline and burned...”

“W...wait a minute. Why do you have such detailed information?!”

“Sorry, but that's a question I can't answer. All I know is that the Syndicate's intelligence gathering is nothing to sneeze at. At any rate...his cause of death made me think that it was you who defeated the Biter, boy. Even with all its fancy equipment, I doubt the SFD would use explosives or firearms powerful enough to blow off the head of a physical

transformation-type Ruby Eye in the middle of the city. So I imagine that Biter tried to bite through your shield with those beloved teeth of his, no? And since he couldn't do that, trying to force it just destroyed his own head..."

Minoru stared in shock; it was as if Liquidizer had been there to witness it herself. He quickly returned to his senses, but it seemed pointless to try to deny it, so he nodded.

"...That's right. He was extremely determined to bite through my protective shell. In the end, he turned the entirety of his head—even his brain—into muscles to try to bite harder..."

"What a foolish man...and a pitiable one."

Liquidizer shook her head a little, then looked back at Minoru.

"At any rate, I surmised that you must have fought Biter here. And at the time, I believe you were not yet an SFD member. Which means you must have encountered Biter by chance while going about your business. So I simply waited for you to show yourself in the area."

"Wait...that's it? How long have you been waiting...?"

"Oh, less than two days. I couldn't move for a full day, so I've been here since yesterday."

"You couldn't move..."

Minoru was confused for a moment before it dawned on him. Liquidizer had been seriously wounded in the fight against Stinger. Even with her Third Eye parasite, it was impressive that she was already moving again.

"...Are you all right now?" he asked without thinking.

She smiled wryly and raised her left hand.

"This arm is still broken, my kidney is hemorrhaging, and both of my hands are covered in burns and lacerations. But other than that, I'm fine."

"So that's why you're wearing those gloves..."

"Yes, they're wrapped up tight in bandages underneath, I'm afraid. It was quite an embarrassing failure, to be frank."

"No, his powers are just particularly awful."

Realizing as he spoke that it seemed like he was comforting her, he covered it up with a loud clearing of his throat. In any case, if her explanation was true, Liquidizer really didn't know Minoru's name, school, or address, at least not yet. The buttons on his uniform with the Yoshiki High School symbol were all covered by his scarf and coat, and the uniform itself was perfectly generic, so she probably wouldn't be able to figure out which school he went to based on this information alone.

"...All right. That explains how you found me. So...what did you want to talk about, exactly?"

"Finally, we can cut to the chase."

Liquidizer held her left hand closer to her mouth, speaking softly

into the mic on her wrist. Each time her pale-pink lips moved, the light inside the mic flashed dizzily.

"It's about Trancer, of course. I want information on him."

"....."

The truth was, Minoru had suspected as much from the moment she'd mouthed *I want to talk*.

In the battle at Ooi Futo Park, when Trancer was about to be killed by Stinger, Liquidizer had pleaded to Minoru—her enemy—to save him. Lying injured on the ground, she spoke to Minoru with desperation written all over her: *I have something I want to protect, too*.

When Minoru agreed to her request, she cut the wireworms that bound Minoru, then appeared to collapse. But once the battle was over, she was nowhere to be seen. That was the night of January 3, so if her explanation was true, she'd slept all through the fourth, then kept watch over Hokusugi Bridge from yesterday until now. All this just to contact Minoru and find out what had happened to Trancer—no, there was probably more to it than that.

"Is information really all you want?" Minoru asked stiffly.

Liquidizer blinked for a moment, then gave a thin smile.

"Yes, I suppose there'd be no point if the information wasn't useful... I want to rescue Trancer from the SFD—no, the so-called 3E Committee. Before they kill him."

Her expression and tone were steady, but Minoru could see determination deep in her eyes. The will to accomplish her goals no matter what.

Forgetting that his protective shell was active, Minoru instinctively took a step back. But he managed to stop there, responding, "They won't kill him...I don't think. When the SFD captures Ruby Eyes, they remove the Third Eye, erase any related memories, and release them. You know that, too, don't you?"

"Yes, I suppose they do in some cases. But it's not a hundred percent guarantee...and even if they do release him, the result is ultimately the same, don't you think?"

"What do you mean...?"

Minoru's brow furrowed. Liquidizer took a step closer, pressing her gloved right hand to her chest as she spoke.

"A Third Eye consumes the wounds of its host's heart and grants them supernatural powers. If the host dies, the Third Eye bursts out and goes back to wherever it came from...presumably somewhere in space. But if it's surgically removed, the 'exodus' still occurs, but the host doesn't die. You Jet Eyes seem to believe that it's the only way to save a Ruby Eye...but is that really true, I wonder?"

"But there's no other way, is there?"

"Do you really think so? Stealing away the wounds of the heart that

were, in a way, keeping a person alive, then leaving them with nothing but an empty hole, to live their lives in a haze without even the awareness to grieve...can you truly call that living, boy?"

"....."

Minoru bit his lip, unable to respond immediately.

Living in a haze with an empty hole in their heart. That was exactly how Minoru had lived until recently. No, maybe that hadn't even changed now that he was a Jet Eye, deep down. He carried an empty hole where his mother, father, and sister had been, living his life hunched over so that he wouldn't remain in anyone's memories.

So could you truly call that living?

".....But..."

Minoru pressed his left hand to the center of his chest, as if mirroring Liquidizer's movement.

"But they still have to go on living. Or are you saying that they would be better off dead? Do you really think that instead of removing their Third Eyes and their memories, the SFD should just kill every Ruby Eye without exception?"

"I would rather you kill them, personally."

Liquidizer spoke without hesitation, lowering her hand.

"That said, I don't know how Trancer feels...so perhaps I'm just being selfish. But I certainly don't want Trancer to die, and I don't want him to become an empty shell, either. I want to rescue him from captivity while he's still himself. So of course I need information for that."

Her eyes glittered behind her black-framed glasses as Minoru stared back at her intently.

"Do you really think I would help you after you told me that?" he croaked.

"Well, I'm not asking you to do it for free, of course."

Liquidizer's tone wavered for a moment, then she held up a finger on her gloved right hand.

"I can give you a few pieces of information in exchange. For one thing...the Ruby Eye in the red coat—I call him X—the one who got away three days ago? I know where he is."

"Huh?"

Although he'd just informed her that he wouldn't help, Minoru couldn't help leaning forward.

"You... You know where Stinger is?!"

"I see; so that's X's code name? I'll go ahead and use that, then. Unfortunately, I don't know his exact location, but I can at least point you in the right direction."

"...What do you mean?"

"You remember at the safe house in Minami-Aoyama, where I trapped you and your little friend in some concrete?"

“.....Yes.”

Minoru grimaced as he remembered. His “little friend” was Suu Komura, code name the Refractor. She’d been severely injured trying to free Minoru from the concrete and was still in the hospital in Hiroo. Fortunately, she’d awoken from her coma and was gradually recovering, but it would be another day or two before she was discharged.

This just reminded Minoru afresh that Liquidizer was an enemy and not to be trusted. He kept this in mind as he listened to the rest of her words.

“I left the safe house after I set that trap, but I preserved the concrete to make sure it wouldn’t liquefy until a certain amount of pressure was put on it. Although I can’t tell from a distance whether it’s actually liquefied or not...”

Suddenly, he remembered Suu’s voice in his ear. Right after they were trapped in the concrete, Suu guessed that Liquidizer had “either set up a delayed activation of her ability or some sort of trigger that activated it.”

The latter was correct, then. It was a terrifying power, but what did it have to do with where Stinger had gone?

As if sensing Minoru’s doubt, the woman waved a hand.

“What’s important here isn’t the preservation part itself. It’s the fact that my senses remain connected to the last thing I liquefied.”

At that, he finally realized what she was getting at.

“Ah...you liquefied Stinger’s coat back then... No, wait a minute, though. If it’s only the last thing you liquefied, didn’t you liquefy the wireworms around me after the coat?”

“You have a remarkable memory. But do you remember which hand I liquefied the coat and the wires with?”

“No, I can’t say I do.”

“This isn’t part of the deal, but I’ll throw it in as a freebie. My liquefaction power works slightly differently in my left and right hands. I use my right hand for delayed activation and other sneaky techniques, so I used that on Stinger, while I cut the wires with my left hand. So I was able to continue sensing Stinger’s coat.”

“...I see. Incidentally, what does the left hand do?”

“Sorry, that information is sold separately.”

Liquidizer’s lips quirked, but she quickly regained her composure. Then she pointed south, in the direction of Tokyo, as she continued.

“Anyway, that explanation went on for a bit. But do you understand how I can tell you where Stinger is now, boy?”

“Yes, I think so. If you know the general direction, then you can narrow down his exact whereabouts by using triangulation.”

“Exactly. As long as he hasn’t gotten rid of that coat, that is...but I

doubt he would do that."

Minoru nodded in agreement.

The rubberlike red coat Stinger wore was no ordinary piece of clothing. It was essentially "living armor," made of countless artificial life-forms called "wireworms" joined together. Liquidizer's right hand had liquefied the coat, but it immediately turned into countless worms and fused back together. The coat could probably deflect a bullet with ease and hold up to high heat or extreme cold as well.

By all accounts, these abilities seemed to go beyond the scope of any other Third Eye powers, but that also meant that surely Stinger wouldn't just throw away such a powerful coat. It was probably safe to assume Stinger really was in whatever direction Liquidizer sensed.

"And Stinger isn't moving at all?" Minoru asked.

Liquidizer nodded, although her brow was furrowed.

"Not for the past two days. Even a Third Eye user couldn't recover that quickly from losing a leg."

"Then we..."

We should attack as soon as possible, Minoru almost started to say, but he fell silent partway through. Obviously, it would be foolish to give Stinger time to recover, but it wasn't Minoru's place to make that decision himself.

"...All right." Shaking off his reluctance to work with an old enemy, Minoru continued. "I'll tell the SFD about your proposal and get their decision. How can I contact you to—?"

"Don't."

"Huh?"

Minoru blinked as Liquidizer fixed an intense gaze on him.

"Don't contact the SFD, boy. There's no way they—or rather, their 'boss'—would ever agree to work with me...especially when my goal is rescuing Trancer."

"But...", Minoru protested. "I hate to say this, but Stinger defeated Trancer without a scratch. It's obvious which one is more dangerous. Surely they'd at least consider..."

"If it were just up to the SFD, perhaps. Your commander is almost disturbingly rational. But the 3E Committee is different. All they care about is how their side can benefit the most from the Third Eye incident. They would never agree to release Trancer now that they've captured him, of that you can be certain. If anything, I imagine they'd pretend to agree and attempt to capture me, too."

"I'm sure that's not..."

But then Minoru stopped. Olivier had said something similar in his room just the day before.

Since those bastards are always in some stupid power struggle, the Professor gets burdened with stuff that shouldn't be her problem in the first

place.

Minoru fell silent, and Liquidizer spoke up in a strained voice.

"It's all well and good to trust your SFD comrades...but you mustn't trust the 3E Committee. They won't let someone with power like yours stay as simple field personnel forever. Eventually, I'm sure they'll try to find a more convenient use for you...perhaps even something that has nothing to do with Ruby Eyes."

Minoru found that he couldn't muster an answer. The memory of entering the reactor at the Tokyo Bay Nuclear Power Plant, which produced a massive ten sieverts of radiation per hour, was still fresh in his mind. Chief Himi and Professor Riri Isa had both protested against Minoru being dispatched there, but in the end, they were overruled. So how could he say for sure that they wouldn't agree to Liquidizer's terms only to capture her as well?

"...But...I can't do anything about it on my own," he managed to mumble. *"All I know is the building where Trancer is being held."*

At that, Liquidizer raised her right hand again, this time holding up two fingers.

"That brings us to the second piece of information. In fact, you could say that this is the main point."

"Wh... You mean it's even more important than Stinger's location?"

"I do."

Liquidizer nodded, then appeared to hesitate for a moment before she spoke again...

"Stargazer."

That single word was all she said.

When Minoru didn't react, she murmured, *"Ah, so you don't know."* Then she paused a moment. *"Repeat that word to Divider and... let's see, Accelerator, and no one else. Tell them I want to make a deal."*

"Huh? Just those two...?"

Minoru thought of Olivier's and Yumiko's faces. Out of all the SFD members, they seemed to hold the most resentment against Ruby Eyes, so they didn't necessarily seem like the right choice for conspirators in a secret deal with one of them...

But as if she knew what he was thinking, Liquidizer continued, *"Don't worry. I chose those two for a reason. They won't be able to ignore my proposal. I want you to tell them you met with me, as soon as you can...but don't use your phone or e-mail. It's possible the 3E Committee is monitoring both."*

"Th-that's ridiculous. Of course they're not..."

"You need to open your eyes, boy. Ever since you joined the SFD...no, ever since you were infected by a Third Eye parasite, you've been living in a world where common sense and convention no longer apply. The 3E

Committee's business department is gathering every single piece of data they can find on you Jet Eyes. From your favorite foods, to your test grades, to the manga you read, and even the type of girls you've dated, they're analyzing all of it to find the most effective way to domesticate you. If it doesn't seem like they're meddling that much to you, then it's only because they've decided to make it seem that way."

"....."

Liquidizer's words seemed so outlandish and paranoid, and so much like a friendly word of warning, that Minoru couldn't simply nod in deference.

"...Then how do you know I'm not being followed right now? Should you really be showing your face to me like this?"

He'd intended it to be sarcastic, but Liquidizer gave a wry yet sinister smile and whispered her response.

"If someone had been following you, I would have erased them before I spoke to you."

"....."

Minoru was forced into silence again. In Liquidizer's case, the word *erased* wasn't just a metaphor. She could turn an entire human being into a puddle of protein soup and simply let them wash away in a gutter. Minoru's spine ran cold again, but he tried to hide his fear by putting on a facade of bravery.

"...I doubt even the 3E Committee could gather much information on me. I don't read a lot of manga, and I've never once dated a girl."

"Oh my, is that true?"

Liquidizer's deadpan response made Minoru realize he could have omitted that part, but it was too late to take it back now.

"So what if it is?"

"Nothing, I just found it surprising... At any rate, I've said everything I came to say. Whether you tell Divider and Accelerator as I requested or spill everything to your superiors is up to you, but remember that I'm not someone to be trifled with."

Minoru stared at Liquidizer's smug face.

She was an enemy, of that there was no doubt. Just a week ago, she'd tried to kill Minoru, and he'd tried to do the same to her.

Even so, the look in her eyes behind those black-framed glasses seemed unlike those of any Ruby Eye he'd fought before. Unable to stand the direct eye contact any longer, Minoru turned his head away before he responded.

"...I'll talk to Divider and Accelerator first. But if they say I should report it, then I'll abide by their wishes."

"That's good enough for me. Thank you."

Liquidizer smiled, produced a small phone from a pocket on her mod coat, and held it out to Minoru.

“Use this phone, and only this phone, to contact me. My number is loaded onto it. Generally, short texts are ideal over phone calls.”

“Ah...r-right.”

Minoru nodded, then made a mistake bigger than any he'd made since this conversation started...no, perhaps the biggest in all his time as a Jet Eye. He reached out to accept the phone, then realized it would slide right out of his hands because of his frictionless protective shell, and so he instinctively deactivated the shell.

His vision went back to normal, and the cold north wind and the sounds of the New Urban Center pressed in on him again. The phone slid from Liquidizer's hand into his. Only when he felt its cool, hard surface did he finally realize what he'd done.

Just then, Liquidizer quickly moved forward, bringing her face near Minoru's chest.

The faint scent of shampoo from her braids sent a below-freezing shiver through his body at once.

She's going to kill me—

As fear overwhelmed him, he nevertheless scrambled frantically to reactivate the barrier.

But then Liquidizer pulled away just as smoothly as she'd approached, looked at the frozen Minoru, and said something completely unexpected.

“It's faint, but...you have an interesting smell, boy.”

“...Huh...?”

Unsure how to react, Minoru simply blinked. It was sheer luck that she hadn't killed him, and he would thoroughly berate himself for his carelessness later, but for now he was simply flummoxed.

“S-smell...? But I showered this morning, and I didn't have gym class today...”

“I didn't mean it like that.”

As he gaped at her, Liquidizer took another step back. Her face was expressionless, but a calm whisper reached him on the cold wind.

“...I'll be waiting to hear from you. Until next time.”

With that, the beautiful Ruby Eye turned abruptly and headed toward the stairs. As he watched her leave, Minoru had a thought.

Should I try to tail her?

But as soon as the thought crossed his mind, he realized he'd be caught right away. He doubted that Olivier and Yumiko would agree to work with Liquidizer, but since he didn't know what “Stargazer” meant, he couldn't just reject the deal without talking to them first.

Putting the small phone away in his uniform pocket, Minoru raised the sleeve of his shirt and gave a light sniff. As he'd thought, he didn't smell sweaty at all.

“...What did she mean, ‘interesting smell’...?”

Grumbling to himself, Minoru started walking. He stopped in front of the stairs and thoroughly scanned the sidewalk below, but Liquidizer was nowhere to be seen. It was then that he finally realized she'd taken the visible light communication mic with her, but by then there was nothing he could do about it.

Leaving his bike at the Yonohonmachi Station bicycle parking area, Minoru boarded the rapid train on the Saikyou line.

The time was 1:20 p.m. Bright sunlight was still streaming in through the train windows, but in this season, it would start getting dark by four o'clock. If his conversation with Yumiko and Olivier seemed like it was going to go on for a while, he would have to let Norie know he was going to be late.

If only Liquidizer had made contact before our study meetup yesterday, it would've been so much more convenient, Minoru thought, heaving a sigh. In the end, the real problem was the fact that it took over an hour each way to get from his home to SFD Headquarters and back. Yumiko's comment that it would take just over a half hour by way of the highway rattled around in his brain.

"A motorcycle, huh...?" Minoru mumbled, leaning against the wall next to the door.

Last year, Saitama Prefecture had repealed the infamous "Three-Nos Motion," which stated that high schoolers could not receive a license, ride a motorcycle, or buy one. As such, many high schools now allowed their students to acquire a two-wheel license under certain conditions, but the Yoshiki High School regulations wouldn't change until the following year, and even then it was going to be limited to vehicles with 50cc engines or less, also known as motorized bicycles. These motorized bicycles weren't allowed on the highway, and Yumiko's estimate probably required a bigger bike anyway. Minoru had never even ridden an electric bike before, so riding a big motorcycle was too intimidating by far.

...I guess I just have to ride the train for now.

With that, Minoru turned his gaze out the window.

He knew he should really be mulling over the deal Liquidizer had proposed to him, but it was honestly too big a burden for him to bear alone. He'd been so tense throughout the entire conversation that his brain was fried, left with no capacity for such intensive thinking. Liquidizer had told him to "open his eyes," but he already had his hands full just dealing with the issue of his grades being too high at school.

As soon as he started thinking about the two answer sheets in his bag and the small smartphone in his inner pocket, his shoulders started to ache. When he'd left school, he was thinking about getting

advice about Hazama from someone at the SFD, but now that was the least of his problems. Heaving a deep sigh, Minoru closed his eyes, thinking he could at least give his brain a break for a few minutes while he was on the train.

An hour later, having transferred onto the Fukutoshin line at Ikebukuro Station, Minoru got off the train at Nishiwaseda Station. Once he'd gone up the stairs and out onto the street, Minoru took out his own phone and messaged Yumiko. "Where are you right now?"

"HQ" was all she responded, so he asked if she wanted to go out for some tea or something. This time, she sent a sticker of a scowling rabbit saying "EXCUSE me?" but Minoru resisted the urge to give up right away and persisted. "I need some advice." Liquidizer had warned him not to use his phone, but he figured that even if he was being monitored, they wouldn't have any way of knowing what this was about. Besides, he had to contact her somehow if he wanted to get her out of headquarters.

Yumiko suggested a patisserie near SFD Headquarters, the one where Olivier had bought those puddings the day before. Minoru quickly walked down Suwa Road, but by the time he arrived at the patisserie, Yumiko was already there. For some reason, instead of her usual uniform, she was wearing a tracksuit and pants under a letterman jacket, and her long hair was pulled into a messy ponytail.

Looking tired, Yumiko raised her hand in greeting and then gestured inside the bakery with her thumb. Minoru had been here twice before, so he knew there was an eat-in area on the second floor, which was probably where Yumiko intended for them to talk. At the counter on the first floor, Yumiko ordered a pistachio roll cake and a café au lait, while Minoru got an apple stollen and a milk tea. Once they received their orders, they carried their trays up the wooden stairs to the second floor.

Luckily enough, the eat-in area happened to be empty. It wasn't very large, but the well-worn wood parquet flooring and black wrought-iron furnishings made for a chic atmosphere. The indoor heating was pleasant, too, especially after the cold wind outside.

Taking off her letterman jacket, Yumiko staked out a table by the window, slumping into her chair with a loud huff.

"...Why are you wearing that at the beginning of the school year? And why do you seem so tired?" Minoru couldn't resist asking as he sat down across from her.

In response, Yumiko held up her palms to him. Her slim fingers were covered in black smudges.

"I headed straight to base after school to do some maintenance and part upgrades on my Augusta. Truth be told, I wanted to do it yesterday, but instead I got stuck doing homework."

“Got stuck? Yesterday was the last day of winter break, so you would’ve had to do it either way...”

Minoru felt like he was stating the obvious, but Yumiko waved a hand dismissively.

“Oh, don’t be so dull. Listen, you don’t actually have to turn in your homework until the first class of each subject, right? So there’s no reason to bring your homework on the first day when all we have is the opening ceremony. Depending on the class, you could theoretically stretch it for up to three days.”

“Those just sound like the excuses of a slacker to me...”

“Oh, hush, you. Just think of it as being flexible.”

Yumiko harrumphed, then picked up her fork, cut off a big piece of the light-green roll cake, and carried it to her mouth. As she chewed the cake and followed it up with a big sip of the café au lait, her expression visibly relaxed.

“Ahhh...the cake here is always so delicious.”

All at once, Minoru realized how hungry he was. He’d been so stressed about the encounter with Liquidizer that it had slipped his mind, but he hadn’t actually eaten lunch yet. Taking a big bite of one of the three slices of stollen, he savored the dense bread and the generous helping of baked apple preserves, filling his mouth with sweetness and tartness at once. *It really is delicious. I should bring something back for Norie...*

After demolishing half her roll cake in the blink of an eye, Yumiko put down her fork with a *clink*.

“So what’s this all about? Romantic advice, perhaps?”

“O-of course not!”

As Minoru whipped his head back and forth rapidly, he felt the weight of the phone in his inner pocket. Pressing a hand against it through the outside of his jacket, he wondered how to broach the subject. He’d called Yumiko alone first because he didn’t think he could emotionally handle being yelled at by both of them at once, but even on her own, he didn’t really want to make Yumiko angry, either. Fortunately (though he wondered if he was allowed to be relieved about this), she seemed tired, so he hoped she would hear him out without exploding on him as he opened his mouth to explain.

“So, erm...earlier, or I guess you’d say a little over an hour ago...”

“Uh-huh.”

“On my way home from school, Liquidizer approached me...”

“Uh-huh.”

Yumiko nodded and took another sip of her café au lait, then blinked a few times. Pitching forward, she nearly sprayed the liquid everywhere—but managed to stop herself, choking on it spectacularly instead. Panicking as Yumiko coughed and hacked, Minoru quickly

handed her an unused napkin, which she pressed to her lips. After coughing for a few more seconds, the Accelerator finally looked up and spilled out a series of questions.

“You mean...Liquidizer? *That* Liquidizer? The Ruby? The old lady who can melt anything?”

“I—I don’t know if I would call her an old lady, but yes.”

“.....”

Yumiko fell silent, a range of expressions crossing her face so rapidly that it was a shame Minoru couldn’t record her. Finally, she settled somewhere between “surprise” and “anger.” Her chair clattered as she leaned forward, her face just a few inches from Minoru’s.

“Wh...why wouldn’t you contact us right away?! And how did she know to find you anyway?! Does she know where HQ is, too?!”

“N...no, it doesn’t seem that way.”

Minoru gave a small shake of the head, then repeated Liquidizer’s explanation. Yumiko seemed to regain a degree of composure as she listened, settling back into her chair and taking a deep breath.

“Hmm... So she figured out you were involved from Biter’s cause of death? That seems like a serious shot in the dark to me. We’ll have to figure out how she got that information, too...”

“Um, well...she seemed to know a lot about the 3E Committee, too. Maybe the source is connected to the committee...”

“I’d like to think that’s impossible, but I suppose we can’t rule it out entirely. With that many government officials and politicians involved, it would be difficult to prevent anything from leaking whatsoever... Still, I suppose it’s better than if we had a leak directly in the SFD.”

Minoru sighed again, and Yumiko glared at him.

“So why exactly didn’t you contact someone right away?”

“Because, um, she said not to.”

“Excuse me?! And you just stupidly followed her demands?!”

Yumiko’s anger meter started rising again, so Minoru hurriedly explained himself. “O-of course not! But she wanted to propose a trade with you, Oli-V, and me.”

“A trade...? Well, of course we’re not going to accept that! What in the world does she want to trade, and for what?!”

“Well, she wants us to help her rescue Trancer...”

Yumiko started to rise from her seat again, but Minoru held up a hand to stop her.

“And in exchange, she’s offering Stinger’s location and, um... something called Stargazer.”

Immediately, all the indignation and emotion drained from Yumiko’s face. She sank back into her chair as if her batteries had run

out, dropping her hands on the table. Her eyes opened wide, losing all focus.

Finally, she spoke in a barely audible voice, her lips trembling. "...You mean she'd give us Claire back...?"

"C...Claire? So 'Stargazer' is a person?"

Yumiko nodded dazedly. "Yes...that's her SFD code name. Her real name is Claire Saito...Oli-V's younger sister."

This time, it was Minoru's turn to be stunned into silence.

Yumiko sat in thoughtful silence for a full two minutes before sighing and producing her phone. She sent someone a message, and within seconds, there was the chime of a response.

"...Oli-V will be here in fifteen minutes."

"All right."

Minoru nodded, looking at Yumiko's reflective black phone—the same color as her beloved Agusta F3 800—and hesitated a moment before speaking.

"Liquidizer said the 3E Committee might be monitoring our phones..."

Immediately, Yumiko grimaced.

"Even they wouldn't... Well, I guess I can't say for sure. I'll talk to the Professor about it."

"Thank you... So, um...Oli-V's sister, you said...?"

Minoru hadn't even known she existed, never mind that she had a code name, so he pushed aside his hesitation to ask about it. Yumiko silently jabbed her fork into the last piece of her roll cake but then put it down as if she'd lost her appetite.

Then, in a quiet murmur, she told Minoru about events that had occurred when the SFD was established.

It was September 1 of the previous year when the Third Eyes fell around the area of Tokyo.

Before long, the chief cabinet secretary's 3E Committee and the Ruby Eyes' Syndicate were formed, followed shortly by the SFD. The first members were Chief Himi, Professor Riri Isa, Yumiko Azu, Sanae Ikoma, and Denjirou Daimon, aka DD. They fought against the Ruby Eyes while searching for new Jet Eyes and eventually discovered Olivier Saito and his sister, Claire Saito.

Though Olivier was now more fervent than anyone about hunting Ruby Eyes, at the time he was afraid of putting his little sister in danger, so he initially declined to join the SFD. It was Claire herself, then a sixth grader, who convinced him. The two of them became SFD members together on October 3...and just two weeks later, on October 17, Claire was taken captive by the Ruby Eyes.

When Yumiko explained this in a carefully emotionless drone,

Minoru couldn't help asking more questions.

"Taken captive...? You mean they sent a sixth grader into battle?"

Immediately, Yumiko raised her head and glared at Minoru.

"The Professor, Oli-V, and I all told her over and over to stay at HQ. But she wouldn't listen, insisting that she was coming, too. Even when Oli-V tried to drag her out of the car, she just hung on to the seat... Finally, we told her not to leave the car no matter what, and DD, Oli-V, Claire, and I all went to the scene. We were just capturing a Ruby Eye who was hiding out in an abandoned house in Arakawa Ward. It should've been a simple enough mission."

"Doesn't that depend on the Ruby Eye's ability...?"

"We had already done reconnaissance, of course," Yumiko responded curtly. "The target was Identified Ruby Eye Host number 9, code name Grasper. A body-transformation type, who could enhance the strength of his grip...a similar type to Biter. He could crush a human limb in his hands easily, but that meant it was safe as long as you didn't get too close, and even in close-range combat, it was nothing Oli-V's division ability couldn't handle. We lured Grasper out of the house and led him to a nearby park, and Oli-V kept him in check with his sword until I knocked him out with a Taser. Everything was going according to plan...until..."

Yumiko trailed off, biting her lip in frustration as she recalled the incident. A few moments later, she grabbed her fork and pushed the rest of the roll cake into her mouth. Then she chugged the rest of the cooled café au lait and let out a long breath before she continued.

"Until two new Ruby Eyes appeared. One of them was Trancer, who we captured recently. And the other one...is still unknown."

"Unknown?"

"We didn't get a single glimpse of them. They used some kind of power to make a bunch of water burst out of some underground water pipes. This was our second time facing Trancer, so we knew to be cautious of water, but we couldn't avoid it when it was spraying out of the ground. Oli-V and I got soaked, and Trancer froze us in place... DD tried to take him down with a handgun, but more water came out of the ground at Trancer's feet, and he used it to freeze all the bullets. By then the ice was up to my face, and I thought I was going to suffocate, but then Claire came running into the park. Trancer tried to freeze her, too, but then...something strange happened."

"Wh...what happened, exactly?"

"An explosion. A huge one that left a crater in the ground. It was explained as a gas explosion on the news, but I didn't smell any gas. Trancer got blown away just like we did, and we couldn't see anything in the smoke... By the time we managed to get out of the ice, Trancer, the other Ruby Eye, and Claire had all disappeared."

Yumiko fell silent, and Minoru gazed at her face. Trying to recreate the situation in his mind, Minoru slowly repeated it to get his thoughts together.

“Erm, so...you and Oli-V got frozen by Trancer...then Claire showed up, and there was immediately an explosion? Wasn't the explosion Claire's ability, then?”

“I thought of that, too, of course, but...Claire's ability could never even hurt a fly, never mind cause such a huge explosion. She got the code name Stargazer because...”

Yumiko paused for a moment, looking up at the sky through the window.

“...she had precognitive abilities.”

“Precognitive...?”

“Yes. A mysterious power, like yours... If she looked up at the stars at night for long enough, she could find out one thing that was going to happen the next day. But she couldn't control the details or timing of the prophecies, so most of them were silly things, like what snacks someone would have the next day or where a lost item would be found. There was one time when she predicted a somewhat large earthquake almost down to the minute, though, and she was occasionally able to predict where a Ruby Eye would appear. The Professor believed that if she honed her ability, she would someday be a huge asset to the SFD...”

Yumiko's words faded into a sigh, and her eyelids fluttered closed.

Minoru gazed at the small crease that had appeared between her eyebrows as he thought.

If Claire Saito's ability was the real thing—not that he imagined it could've been fake—then having an explosive power as well would go against the basic rule of Third Eye abilities: “manipulating specific atoms or molecules.” Then was the explosion that saved Yumiko and the others from suffocating caused by someone other than Claire? And if so, then why had she charged onto the battlefield...no, why had she been so insistent on going with them for that particular mission?

“...Could it be that Claire knew that you and Oli-V would be in danger...?” Minoru murmured.

At that, Yumiko opened her eyes. But her gaze stayed on the table as she shook her head slowly.

“Maybe so, maybe not. Only Claire would know for sure.”

“...Are we certain Claire was captured by the Ruby Eyes? I, um... I don't even want to say it, but...if the explosion was big enough to make a crater, isn't it possible she got caught in it...?”

“No. At the very least, we know she didn't die in the explosion, because the Third Eye ‘exodus phenomenon’ didn't occur. But it was only about a week ago that we confirmed with certainty that she was

captured. When Oli-V fought Trancer in Minami-Aoyama on New Year's Eve, he said something before he fled: *Your princess is still safe. They're taking extremely good care of her.*"

"I had no idea..." Minoru lowered his head and took a deep breath, but after a minute, his gaze flicked up at Yumiko. "But why didn't you tell me sooner about all this? No, more importantly...why isn't the entire SFD making rescuing Claire a top priority? If Oli-V's sister has been captured by the enemy, shouldn't we be focusing on that...?"

Though his tone bordered on accusatory, Yumiko's expression remained unperturbed. "It is a top priority. To rescue Claire, we need to know everything about the Syndicate, but ultimately that just means capturing Syndicate Ruby Eyes and trying to get information out of them. It was Oli-V's request that we not tell any new SFD members about the incident unless it became necessary."

"What...? But why...?"

"Because he blames himself for the entire thing. He thinks he wasn't able to protect Claire because he wasn't strong enough."

"....."

Minoru wasn't able to respond to those words. Before he could open his mouth, there was the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs.

Wearing a mountain parka over his blazer-type uniform, Olivier strolled right over to the pair's table, leaning over as if he couldn't waste a second on sitting down.

"What's this important thing you have to talk to me about?"

In the end, Minoru went back to Saitama City without even stopping at SFD Headquarters.

There was still some sunlight remaining in the wide-open space. The only reason he was able to get back before sundown despite the long time they'd spent talking in the patisserie was that Yumiko gave him a ride on her Agusta. When she completed the trip that normally took him more than seventy minutes in about half the time, without using her acceleration power or even the emergency vehicle lights in her pannier case, Minoru couldn't help reconsidering his reluctance to buy a motorcycle of his own.

What should I do? he wondered as he took off his helmet. Glancing at him, Yumiko grinned slyly.

"I bet you're starting to want your own motorcycle now, hmm?"

"N-no, I don't..."

He *began* to deny it reflexively, then realized there was no harm in getting a little more information.

"...I don't know, but if I *were* hypothetically thinking about it, how exactly would I go about acquiring a license and purchasing one and all that?"

Immediately, Yumiko put on a very composed expression and started rattling off a response as if she'd been waiting for the chance all along.

"You can get the license itself in a matter of days just by requesting it, whether it's a two-wheel license, oversize vehicle license, or any other kind you might desire. As for the purchasing paperwork, the SFD's equipment department can take care of that for you, too. Although the name on the inspection sticker will be a fake company."

"Equipment department..."

Minoru thought back. If he remembered right, the high-tech baby carrier—its official name was a "back-mounting harness"—that he'd used to carry Suu Komura when they scouted out the enemy base in Minami-Aoyama had also been made by this "equipment department." But Minoru didn't know anything else about it.

As he frowned in thought, Yumiko once again seemed to know what he was thinking.

"Right, I guess you haven't been to the base yet."

"...I've heard people mention it once in a while. So the 'base' isn't

the same thing as headquarters?"

"No, although it is quite close by. I'll show you around sometime."

She smiled, but the expression lasted only a moment before she continued in a low, serious voice.

"Really, though, you need a certain level of mobility in our line of work. Think of our meeting with Liquidizer tomorrow, for example—if it is a trap, we'll have to flee, but you and Oli-V can't drive, so we might end up having to squeeze in together on this baby."

Yumiko patted her large motorcycle, which was still sparkling like new from its recent maintenance. Its rider, too, had changed from her tracksuit into a black leather jumpsuit, which Minoru had to admit was rather appealing.

"...If it really does come to that, just leave me and get away with Oli-V, please. We already know for a fact that even she can't melt my shell."

In response, Yumiko prodded him lightly on the shoulder with her left hand.

"Don't be ridiculous. My Agusta's got one hundred fifty horsepower, so a skinny little thing like you wouldn't slow her down at all. If I tell you to get on, you better do it right away."

"...All right."

Minoru had no choice but to agree to his partner's order. Once he nodded, she removed her hand and whirled around.

They were currently in a green strip that ran along the west side of Yonohonmachi Station. The sunset dyed the brick-like tiles at their feet a deep red. It was a rather romantic atmosphere, but the Accelerator looked serious as ever as she whispered to him.

"...It doesn't seem like we're being watched to me, but be careful just in case. Liquidizer already knows you live in this area somewhere... I can't imagine it would be that difficult for her to track down your school or home address if she really wanted to."

"Maybe, but Saitama City is pretty big, since it started as three cities that merged together around twenty years ago. I think its population is in the top ten of ordinance-designated cities, too."

"Still, it's only a fraction of the twenty-three wards of Tokyo, isn't it?"

"Um...about one-seventh, I guess..."

"So that means it's seven times easier to search than Tokyo."

Does it, though?

But before Minoru could say that out loud, Yumiko continued, looking pensive. "Honestly, I'd prefer to stay over at your house until this business with Liquidizer is taken care of, but since Komusho is monitoring you there, he might find out and tell HQ about it..."

"Huh...? You mean the SFD keeps tabs on members' private

romantic lives, too?"

".....Huh?"

".....What?"

The pair stared at each other for a moment. Yumiko's pale cheeks seemed to be a tiny bit pink...but by the time Minoru noticed this, she was already grabbing the collar of his Chesterfield coat.

"Look, you, when I say I want to stay over, I obviously mean in case of a Ruby attack, not in a...in a scandalous way!"

As soon as Yumiko voiced that word, Minoru felt his own ears go red, too, but he had no choice but to argue back. "I—I know that, of course! I just mean that since Komusho doesn't know what's going on, it might look that way to him if you suddenly start coming over my place..."

"No it wouldn't!"

"What do you think it would look like, then?!"

As they argued, they suddenly heard giggling from nearby and whirled around in unison.

Three middle school girls passing through the green strip were eyeing Minoru and Yumiko, whispering among themselves.

Yumiko pulled her hand away as fast as if she'd received an electric shock, hissing under her breath. "Honestly. They're laughing at us because of the weird things you said!"

"You're the one who said you wanted to stay over..."

"Because of the danger, I told you!"

"But how would we explain that to Norie, exactly?"

"Well, that's for you to figure out."

Really...

As Minoru raised his eyebrows, Yumiko yanked the spare helmet out of Minoru's hand. Then she put it away in the pannier case and donned the full-face helmet she'd hung from the motorcycle's handlebars.



“...At any rate, just be extra-careful tonight. And make sure you’re not late for our meeting time tomorrow. I have to get ready, so I can’t come and pick you up!”

“R...right. But the place Liquidizer chose is a bit far away, so if I head over right after school, I’ll just barely make it in time...”

“Then just leave school early or something. You can’t be late, no matter what! We have to make sure there’s nobody nearby waiting to ambush us or anything like that before the meeting.”

“...Right.”

Yumiko nodded briskly, then slung her slim legs over her bike. Starting the engine, she lowered the helmet’s shield over her face.

With a final wave, she took off at a high speed down the road. Her jet-black supersport vanished into the dark within moments.

Minoru watched until her special taillights were out of sight, then started walking toward the station’s bike parking area. It was 5:07 p.m. Though the evening was still young, he already felt like it had been a very long day.

But tomorrow would be the real challenge.

The smartphone Liquidizer gave him contained only one phone number. When he sent a short text that they wanted to accept the deal, Liquidizer simply responded with a time and place: 6:00 p.m., in the central plaza of Yoyogi Park. Minoru had never been there before, but he knew it was close to Harajuku Station and Meiji Shrine.

Minoru had no idea why she had chosen that particular location. Yumiko said there was nothing but grass there, so perhaps she was just being cautious of an SFD ambush, but Minoru and company had to be equally careful. Liquidizer had the ability to set a delayed liquefaction trap, but he doubted she could possibly liquefy an entire park. Hopefully, this meant they wouldn’t fall for the same trick that caught them in Minami-Aoyama.

Whether the decision to agree to the deal was right or wrong, Minoru couldn’t say. All he knew for sure was that if and when they reported it to Professor Riri later, she would be absolutely furious. They might be punished with house arrest or a drop in pay or, in the worst-case scenario, fired.

Minoru had given a lot of thought to this possibility, but he decided he wanted to prioritize Olivier’s decision above all else. He’d been worried nonstop about his captured sister as he fought for more than two months now. Just how much anxiety and anguish was he hiding behind that aloof exterior? In this situation, where he couldn’t rely on the police or even the 3E Committee for help, it would be beyond cruel to tell him to reject the glimmer of hope he’d finally been offered. Minoru had no doubt that he, too, would do anything if

it meant he could bring his sister Wakaba back to life.

“...This is the right choice, isn’t it, Wakaba?”

Minoru looked up at the sky, but of course there was no response. He blinked a few times before walking through the pedestrian gate of the bicycle parking area.

The night passed without further incident. Minoru ate dinner with Norie, did his homework, took a bath, and went to bed.

Early the next morning—Wednesday, January 7, at 5:15 a.m.—Minoru was awoken by the buzzing of his phone.

Grabbing the smartphone by his pillow, Minoru gazed sleepily at the screen for a moment before he realized it was a phone call and not just his alarm. The name on the screen was...Tomomi Minowa. Minoru woke himself up in the span of two seconds, then pressed the accept icon.

“Minowa?” he asked, pressing the phone to his right ear, but she didn’t answer at first. *Has she gotten mixed up in another incident...?*

As he was about to leap out of bed, she finally responded. “...*Sorry to call you so early, Utsugi.*”

Upon hearing her voice, Minoru breathed a small sigh of relief. “No, no, it’s fine. I was about to wake up anyway.”

It was true: His alarm was set for 5:30. For the past five years, he’d been getting ready in fifteen minutes and going out for a run along the bank of the Arakawa River nearly every morning; recently, meeting up with Tomomi on the Hanekura Bridge if she contacted him and running together had become part of that tradition. Normally, though, she didn’t contact him until 5:40 at the earliest, and it was always through a messaging app, never a phone call.

“...Is everything all right?” Minoru asked hesitantly.

Once again, Tomomi fell silent. As he pressed the phone closer to his ear so he wouldn’t miss a word, Minoru could hear the sound of uneven breathing. It took him a few seconds to realize she was crying.

“Minowa...”

Minoru’s breath caught as he repeated her name. Finally, she responded again.

“*Utsugi...I... Something’s wrong with me.*”

“Wrong...? What’s the matter?”

“*It’s like...like I’m not myself...*”

Choking out the words, Tomomi started crying again. *This is serious*, Minoru thought. “Where are you right now?!”

She didn’t respond right away, but after a few painful seconds, she mumbled “*Near my house*” amid her sobs. “Near her house”—that meant she was outside. The temperature was probably close to

freezing. He was about to tell her to go back inside right away, but then he realized there must be a reason she couldn't do so.

"I...I'll be right there, so just try to stay warm while you wait!" he said desperately.

".....Okay." With that, the phone call was cut off.

Minoru jumped out of bed, threw off the sweats he was wearing as pajamas, and changed into his running wear. Being careful not to wake Norie, who was asleep in the next room over, he went down the stairs as quickly as he could, pulled on his shoes impatiently, and dashed out of the house.

He had just been to Tomomi's house four days ago. Though he hadn't realized it before, she lived only about a third of a mile away in a straight line. Reaching the nearby Kamo River, he sped south along its unpaved bank. The sky was still mostly dark, and there were no lights on the path, but his Third Eye-enhanced vision and strength allowed him to run at top speed.

Soon he came upon the next bridge, where he moved to the road and headed east. Tomomi's house was just past the elementary school, then right around the next corner—

"...!"

Spotting a blur of green in the corner of his vision, Minoru skidded to a halt.

A small figure was crouching in front of the elementary school gate, hugging her knees to her body. She had short, fluffy hair and a lime-green windbreaker. Minoru didn't need to see her face to know at a glance that it was her.

Taking a deep breath of the cold air to steady himself, Minoru slowly walked over to her. "...Minowa?"

When he called out to her, her slim shoulders trembled a little. She didn't seem to be crying anymore, but she didn't move to lift her head up, either. Minoru hesitated for a moment, then sat down next to Tomomi against the black gates.

I have to say something, he thought, but his words just wouldn't come. He'd never had a girl ask him for help like this before; even if he had, the old Minoru from before last fall wouldn't have wanted to get involved. He didn't think he'd changed that much in just a few months, but Tomomi had become a dear friend to him. If she was suffering somehow, he wanted to help her...even if it meant making more dreaded memories.

Instead of speaking, Minoru took off his windbreaker and put it over Tomomi's shoulders. All he was wearing underneath was a cold-resistant undershirt, but between the way he'd run here at top speed and his Third Eye, he didn't feel the cold at all.

They sat in silence for a while, but finally Tomomi's hand moved,

pulling Minoru's windbreaker tighter around herself. A puff of white breath lingered in the predawn darkness.

"...I'm surprised you were able to find me so fast. All I said was that I was near my house."

Her voice still sounded a little choked. Minoru, naturally, responded completely artlessly. "Well, it was on the way... Plus, the color of your coat stands out."

"I really like the color green. I just got this as a Christmas present... Normally, wearing it gets me excited to run, but...lately..."

Tomomi finally raised her head, looking up at him. Fresh tears were welling in her round eyes. "...It took me five whole minutes to run here from my house."

"What...?"

Minoru blinked and looked around. Across from the school gates where they were sitting was a large temple, and Minowa's house was right on the other side. It was probably less than three hundred meters away, even by way of the path, so it shouldn't take five minutes even to walk here.

"...Are you not feeling well? You shouldn't push yourself..."

He was about to ask if she'd caught a cold when it finally occurred to him.

Tomomi had mentioned this yesterday morning when they ran into each other on the way to school. That she'd been feeling strange lately, not wanting to run even though she loved it.

"...Is it what you told me about yesterday?"

Tomomi nodded. "Uh-huh. I wanted to run with you this morning no matter what...so I managed to get out of the house, but with every step, my legs and my body just felt heavier and heavier, and it got harder even to walk... By the time I got here, I couldn't even stand up anymore..."

"..."

Shocked into silence, Minoru looked automatically at the girl's legs. It was impossible to tell through her clothes, but if what she said was true, then it probably wasn't a physical issue. If she was going about her regular life as usual, but her legs started getting heavy only when she was running, then it was probably a mental block of some kind, like the "little slump" she'd mentioned.

Still, he wasn't sure exactly what to do. Maybe she should talk to her coach, or upperclassmen from the track-and-field club, or even the school counselor? But would that really solve the problem?

As he struggled to find the right words, Tomomi lowered her head again, pulling her knees closer to her body.

"If this really is a slump...I didn't know they could be so illogical. I really do love running...and I thought I'd started to love it even

more since we started jogging together in the mornings. It's like this isn't really my body..."

"Minowa..."

Overwhelmed with frustration at his own inability to offer her any advice, Minoru held his breath. Before he knew it, he was reaching out with his right hand and placing it on Tomomi's back. Under his palm, he felt her muscles tremble for a moment, but she soon leaned over, resting her body against Minoru's. This meant he was now embracing her around the shoulder, but Minoru didn't move. He suddenly had the feeling that someone had done the same thing for him, and soon he remembered why.

When he had just joined the SFD, Olivier had once punched Minoru in the face. He was angry because, although Minoru's mistake had led to the Igniter claiming another victim, some part of him still seemed to think it wasn't his problem. Though now he felt like the punch was well deserved, he couldn't accept that at the time, and he ended up curling up inside his protective shell in the basement parking lot of SFD Headquarters.

Then Yumiko showed up. *I still believe in you*, she said. *I believe in the person who came running to save me from Biter*. And just for a moment, she held Minoru in a tight embrace. It was probably that show of kindness that had kept Minoru from quitting the force.

"I like running with you, too, Minowa."

He tilted his head toward Tomomi's as she huddled against his right side.

"I've been running on the bank of the Arakawa River almost every morning for the past five years, but the truth is, I never particularly liked running. I was just doing it because it was a way to stop myself from thinking about things. But...ever since I started running with you, I've noticed a lot of things. Like how beautiful the river is at dawn, and how delicious water tastes when you drink it at the turnaround point of a run...and how much fun it is to run with someone else. If... If you feel the same way...as long as you hang on to that feeling, then I'm sure you'll be able to run again soon."

It was a baseless declaration, but Tomomi pressed her head into Minoru's shoulder and nodded twice, then three times.

"Yeah... Yeah, you're right. I have fun running with you, too. I like running at practice and in races and stuff, but there's something special about those times... On days where we were going to run together, I always got excited before I even left the house. So how...? Why...?"

Hearing the anguish in her voice, Minoru thought Tomomi was about to cry again. But instead she pulled away from him, put her hands on her knees, and started to stand up. Her thin body shook as

she rose, so Minoru hurriedly supported her.

Once she was shakily on her feet, Minowa took a long, deep breath; stepped forward; and turned around. Holding out the black windbreaker Minoru had laid over her shoulders, she smiled at last.

“Let’s run, Utsugi.”

“What...?”

Minoru’s brow furrowed as he accepted the windbreaker.

“You really shouldn’t push yourself, though. We can run together as much as we want once you’re feeling better...”

“I think running with you *will* make me feel better. Don’t worry... I’m feeling a little better now.”

Tomomi still looked pale, but that might have just been the effects of the LED streetlight, so Minoru couldn’t tell if she seemed ill or not. Feeling as if he had no other choice, Minoru pulled on the windbreaker and zipped it up.

“All right...but let’s take it slow today, okay? Don’t overdo it.”

“Uh-huh!”

Tomomi nodded and started warming up. Minoru stretched alongside her, glancing at the sky to the east. It would probably be more than a half hour before the sun rose, but he decided to turn back at the five-kilometer mark today instead of the usual ten.

“I’ll match your pace, all right, Minowa?”

“Thanks... Okay, let’s go, then.”

Tomomi smiled and started jogging with a little hop. Once they reached the road, she gradually increased her speed. Her pace and form looked perfectly normal, and Minoru was just thinking that it must be a purely mental problem after all when it happened.

They’d only run about twenty meters, but Tomomi’s stride suddenly broke down. Her upper body wobbled, and she tried to keep her balance, but she tumbled down on the side of the road.

“Careful...!”

As Minoru cried out, he dashed across the ground as quickly as he could. Stretching his left arm between her and the asphalt, he just barely managed to catch her in time. Crouching on one knee, he held Tomomi in both arms, speaking to her frantically.

“Minowa! What’s wrong, Minowa?!”

But Tomomi’s eyes were closed, and she didn’t respond. Quickly tilting his head close to her lips, he felt her faint breathing, but it sounded far too frail for only having run a few seconds. When he touched her cheek, it was shockingly cold. This didn’t seem like she’d fainted from dehydration or low blood pressure.

“Ambulance...”

Muttering to himself anxiously, Minoru was reaching into his pocket for his phone when he realized they were still just steps away

from Tomomi's house.

Minoru gently lifted her in his arms and, being careful not to jostle her around too much, broke into a run.

When Minoru's morning classes ended, he hurried not to the lunchroom but to classroom eight of the freshman wing.

This was Tomomi Minowa's class, but he wasn't going there to see her. That morning, her father had driven her to the general hospital; fortunately, she regained consciousness during the examination but was admitted to the hospital as a precaution because she showed symptoms of anemia. Since Minoru had been there when she collapsed, he came along to the hospital and explained the situation to the doctor, although it was very stressful to talk about Tomomi's situation with her father listening.

Luckily, Mr. Minowa was a very collected person, and while he'd of course shouted when he initially saw the unconscious Tomomi, he had stayed calm afterward and even thanked Minoru when he left.

Mr. Minowa mentioned that both he and his wife had noticed that their daughter had been acting strangely for the past few days. The doctors were going to determine the cause of her condition with thorough testing, and hopefully, it would be something treatable—but the results wouldn't be ready for a few days. So Minoru decided to do a little investigating of his own in the meantime.

As he approached classroom eight, students rushed past him on their way to lunch. Spotting the face he was looking for among them, he jogged over to the student in question.

"Ogu?"

When he gathered up the courage to call out, the dark-skinned boy turned around. It was Shouya Ogu, a track-and-field member like Minowa.

Ogu blinked a few times, then told his two friends to go on ahead, gesturing Minoru toward the other end of the hallway with his eyes. Once they reached the wall, it was Ogu who spoke first. "This about Minowa?"

"Um...yeah."

Minoru nodded, and an expression of concern clouded the athlete's healthy face. "She's not here today."

"I know... That's what I wanted to talk to you about."

"All right." Ogu nodded, then glanced down the hall. "The lunch room'll be pretty busy... Guess I better take you to my secret base."

"S-secret base?"

"Yeah, just this once. C'mon, let's grab some food first."

Once they'd each bought a drink and some bread at the shop attached to the lunchroom, Ogu headed toward the south building.

On the other side of that building was a training area. One month prior, Ogu and two male upperclassmen from the track-and-field club had threatened Minoru a little behind this building. Minoru wondered for a moment if they were going to the same spot, but once they went through the hallway into the south building, Ogu started heading up the stairs.

This building contained staff rooms, offices, and specialized classrooms; the higher the floor, the less people were likely to be there. But Ogu went past the fourth floor and led Minoru even higher. Students weren't allowed on the roof, but Ogu's "secret base" turned out to be the landing at the top of the stairs in front of the door to the roof, about three square meters. It was all but invisible from the fourth-floor hallway, making it an ideal spot for a private conversation.

"Huh...I never knew this place was here."

Minoru looked around the space, which got a surprising amount of sunlight, while Ogu puffed out his chest proudly.

"I found this place myself. There's never anyone around, so I come here when I wanna be alone."

So even Ogu has times when he wants to be alone.

Minoru kept this thought to himself. That was probably obvious anyway. Considering how long Ogu felt guilty after harassing Minoru with his friends that time, he seemed to actually be quite a sensitive person.

"...Is it all right if I use it once in a while, too?"

At that, Ogu finally smiled.

"Go for it. Careful, though, there is a rumor that this spot is haunted."

No wonder nobody ever comes here!

Minoru bit back this remark, instead forcing himself to smile.

The two of them leaned against the wall and slid down to sit on the floor, promptly opening the packaging of their buns. Minoru bit into his soy flour bun, while Ogu devoured his *yakisoba* bun. In no time, they were halfway through their meals.

Minoru took a sip from his soy milk carton, then brought up the main subject.

"So...about Minowa being absent..."

"Lemme ask you something first."

Ogu held up his banana au lait to interrupt Minoru.

"I'm just gonna ask you PB. Utsugi, are you and Minowa dating?"

"....."

Minoru couldn't bring himself to point out that abbreviating *point-*

blank to PB was a little ridiculous, so instead he rapidly shook his head.

“N...no, of course not!”

“Think you’re gonna ask her out, then? Or say yes if she asks you?”

“No, neither!”

“C’mon, dude, you can’t say no if *she* asks you.”

Then why did you ask me that?! Minoru thought as Ogu shoved the rest of the *yakisoba* bun into his mouth. He chewed it up noisily, then washed it down with a gulp of banana au lait. Then he heaved a long sigh before he looked at Minoru again.

“Look, I’m not gonna tell you to ask her out, but if she does ask you out, you gotta say yes. If you don’t, I’m gonna punch you myself this time.”

The old Minoru probably would’ve fled as soon as someone threatened even mild violence, but now he was able to accept the real feelings behind Ogu’s remarks. But he couldn’t just blindly agree to Ogu’s demand, either.

I don’t intend to go out with anyone, ever. But how could Minoru explain that in a way Ogu would understand? Before he could open his mouth, however, Ogu smacked Minoru lightly on the shoulder.

“I don’t think that’s gonna happen, though!”

He chuckled, then opened his melon cream bun and took a big bite before looking serious again.

“So...what’d you wanna talk to me about? D’you know why Minowa’s not here?”

“...Yeah.”

Minoru nodded and explained the situation as best he could. How they’d been meeting up to run in the mornings lately. How Tomomi admitted to him yesterday that she’d been feeling strange. And how this morning, she had collapsed as if from anemia...

“Anemia? Is that what it was, then?”

Minoru had been bracing himself for Ogu to be angry that they’d been running together outside of school, but instead he looked more troubled by the last part.

“I think so... They’re going to do some tests over the next few days, but that’s what they said the symptoms looked like.”

“That’s weird. Tomomi is the girls’ team’s long-distance ace, so her hematocrit and hemoglobin levels are probably even higher than the average guy’s. I’m pretty sure she takes iron supplements on the regular, too...”

Hematocrit levels referred to the number of red blood cells in the blood, while hemoglobin levels meant the amount of hemoglobin present inside those red blood cells. Young athletes were susceptible

to something called “sports anemia,” but even Minoru took occasional iron supplements because of his personal running habit, so surely a strong athlete like Tomomi would be even more careful about it.

So if she was showing symptoms of anemia despite all that...

“Some other illness, then...?”

But Ogu shook his head. “That’s crazy. I heard she just broke her personal best time the other day. What kind of illness would make someone decline that quickly?”

It probably wasn’t impossible, but he had to admit that would be unnatural. Gazing at the last piece of his bread, Minoru mulled it over for a while.

“No...wait a sec,” Ogu said suddenly. “I think I’ve heard about something like this pretty recently...”

Minoru looked to his right at the other boy. “Huh? You have...?”

“Yeah. Lemme think... Y’know Yuka Maezaki, that attacker from the girls’ volleyball team? She’s in Class Six.”

“Sorry, I don’t think so...”

“Damn, you really don’t care about girls at all, huh?”

Ogu pulled out his smartphone and fiddled with it for a moment. “Here, the one on the right.”

The photo he showed Minoru was of three boys and two girls. The female student making a peace sign on the right side was about the same height as Ogu, who was striking a goofy pose next to her. She had sharp, handsome features and bright eyes.

“Oh yeah... I think I’ve seen her around.”

“Well, yeah. She’s a first-year like us. Maezaki only started volleyball in high school, but she hits a mean spike, so she became a regular really fast. She was a total MVP in the varsity girls’ volleyball tournament last November.”

“Huh... Why do you know so much about her when she’s in a different class and sport?”

Minoru’s blunt question set Ogu on the defensive.

“I—I don’t know that much, dude. You just hear these kinda things when you play sports.”

“Uh-huh.”

Then why do you have a photo of her? he thought, but instead he just returned to the main topic.

“So...what about her? You mentioned something similar to what happened to Minowa...?”

“Yeah... I dunno all the details, but I heard she got sick during practice over winter break, and they had to bring her to the hospital from school. That kinda thing can happen if you’re doing intense training, so I didn’t think that much about it at the time, but...”

Ogu frowned down at his phone for a minute, then started tapping

the screen again. He seemed to be contacting someone with a messaging app, since the *pop!* that indicated a reply followed shortly after. Looking at the message, his frown deepened as he showed it to Minoru.

“Maezaki’s been out of school since yesterday, too. The hospital said it was anemia... D’you think it’s just a coincidence?”

“.....”

Unable to respond right away, Minoru blinked a few times.

It was probably a coincidence...right? Otherwise, that must mean Tomomi Minowa and Yuka Maezaki had both contracted an infectious disease that caused iron-deficiency anemia or something. But did such a disease even exist?

Minoru pulled out his own phone and searched with the keywords *anemia* and *infection*. Skimming through the results, he found that a stomach bacteria called *Helicobacter pylori* could induce anemia. But thanks to modern sanitation, the bacteria were usually only passed from person to person through oral transmission. The rate of infection for youths and teens was only around 10 percent, but since Yoshiki High School had more than twelve hundred students, that would mean roughly 120 of them would likely become infected by *H. pylori*. Actually, was it possible that maybe someone was somehow artificially spreading the infection?

“I wonder if any other students are absent...,” Minoru murmured.

Ogu shrugged exaggeratedly. “Probably. It is flu season.”

“No, I mean with anemia.”

“How would I know that?”

He looked exasperated, but Minoru pressed on anyway.

“Is there any way you can try to find out with your Ogu network? There might be an illness going around at Yoshiki that causes it.”

Minoru went on to somewhat clumsily explain the information he’d just researched. Ogu was admittedly more interested in athletics than anything else, but he hadn’t gotten into Yoshiki High by chance; he caught on quickly and started rubbing his stomach, looking unhappy.

“Isn’t an *H. pylori* infection the thing that gives old guys stomach cancer?”

“I don’t know if it’s just old guys, but yes, that’s the one. Apparently, it can also cause anemia. I read that seventy percent of young patients who get anemia for unknown reasons actually have *H. pylori* infections.”

“Hrmm... But, like, would someone really be spreading something like that at our school? Where would you even get the bacteria in the first place?”

“I know it’s kind of a far-fetched idea, but still...”

Realizing how ridiculous his own theory sounded, Minoru fell silent. Ogu, who had finished eating a melon cream bun, leaned against the handrails and stretched out his legs.

"Maybe the thing with Minowa and Maezaki is just a coincidence after all. If there was really a pylori pandemic at Yoshiki, wouldn't there be more people feeling sick, even if they weren't passing out from anemia? I haven't heard anything like that in our class or in the track-and-field club."

"I guess I haven't in my class, either..."

But then it dawned on him.

Multiple students feeling off, even if they weren't actually passing out... Hadn't he just heard about something like that yesterday?

"No, wait a sec...", Minoru murmured.

Ogu peered down at him. "What, didja think of something else?"

"Mm...I don't think it's related to anemia, but... You know how the math and science classes take proficiency tests along with midterms?"

"Oh, that thing they throw back in your faces right on the first day of each semester? Those teachers are total sadists."

"I agree. But yesterday, when those results came out...a group of people who had always been at the top suddenly all had their grades take a huge dive. Someone told me it was the biggest shake-up since the inception of the math and science program."

"Huh..." Ogu didn't sound that interested at first, but then his brow furrowed. "Wait, are you saying that might be because of anemia due to *H. pylori* infections, too? That's crazy; how could a bacteria only infect the kids with the highest grades?"

"It's not just the high-performing students. Minowa is the girls' track-and-field ace, and didn't you say Maezaki is the MVP of the volleyball team?"

Ogu's jaw dropped.

He drew his legs back in, grabbing his knees with his hands. Then he glanced to either side for some reason, leaned in close to Minoru, and spoke in a whisper.

"You mean...the kids who are good at school and sports are being targeted? Like someone went after Minowa and Maezaki and those nerds and infected them with *H. pylori* on purpose?"

"It might be limited to first-years, too. Although we can't say for sure that a pylori infection is really the cause..."

As he continued, Minoru thought back to Tsumori's unusually pale face when he'd glared at Minoru for being praised by the teacher.

"But I do think it's possible that all the students who are off their game are suffering from something like iron deficiency. It can affect more than just your physical strength, right?"

“Yeah, ’cause it causes an oxygen deficiency in the brain. The track coach said it can affect your thinking and memory, too.”

Ogu shook his head slowly. “But...if that’s actually what’s happening, then it’d be no joke. ’Cause if someone’s going after the people who are smart or good at sports, then...”

“Yeah...the culprit is probably a student. A first-year, too.”

“For real? Dude, that’s gotta be a crime, right? You’re not saying we should find the culprit ourselves, are you, Utsugi?”

Minoru smiled grimly. “Of course not. If it’s true, then we should talk to the teachers...maybe even the police. Although there *are* ways we could track the culprit down.”

“Wait, seriously?”

Ogu’s eyes widened. Minoru was about to explain the method he had just thought of, but then he clamped his mouth shut.

If the culprit was systematically targeting students with the highest grades, then the obvious suspects would be students whose grades had either stayed the same or greatly improved. Minoru was about to say as much, but then he realized that he fell squarely into the latter category. Mr. Mano had even said so himself: His ranking on the proficiency test had gone up more than any other student.

“Hey, what kinda ways?”

Ogu leaned in eagerly, but Minoru quickly shook his head.

“No, we probably shouldn’t try to play detective.”

“C’mon, you’re the one who said it in the first place...”

“A-anyway, could you look into whether any other athletic kids aren’t feeling well? I’ll try to talk to some people whose grades went down. If some of them also have symptoms of anemia...”

“Yeah, then your pylo-terror theory gets a lot less crazy.”

“P-pylo-terror...?”

“I mean, this is basically bioterrorism we’re talking about, yeah? *H. pylori* infection terrorism, so pylo-terror. Damn, now it’s starting to feel like we’re characters on one of those American hospital dramas.”

This isn’t a game, Minoru noted, but he refrained from saying it. As of now, this was all just a baseless theory and lots of conjecture, so maybe it was best to just think of it like a game.

Ogu slapped his knees and stood up abruptly.

“All right, I’m gonna get started right now. Utsugi, gimme your LANE ID.”

“Oh, right...okay.”

I never thought the day would come that I’d exchange IDs with this guy, Minoru reflected as he pulled up the code on his phone and held it out to Ogu.

Once fifth-period math and a short homeroom session were over,

Minoru hurriedly gathered his things. The time was 3:30 p.m. Their meeting with Liquidizer was in Yoyogi Park at six, but he was meeting Yumiko at Harajuku Station at five, so there was no time to waste. Technically, as long as he made the Saikyou line express train that left Yonohonmachi Station at 4:17 p.m., he would arrive at Harajuku by 4:59, but he was hoping to catch the train before that just to be safe.

Even for that one, though, he still didn't need to leave school for another fifteen minutes. For the time being, Minoru stayed in his seat, his eyes drifting toward the right side of the classroom.

The student his eyes fell on was Satoshi Tsumori. He had always ranked in the top three of the whole school, but in the most recent proficiency test, he had dropped all the way out of the top twenty. Minoru had to find out whether the cause was actually anemia.

As he watched, Tsumori sluggishly shoved his textbooks into his shoulder bag, then put both hands on his desk to stand up. He stayed in that position for a few moments—had he gotten dizzy?—before he finally dragged his feet out of the classroom. Minoru waited a little, then followed after him.

Tsumori didn't seem to have noticed Minoru following him, but the goal was to talk to him, not just tail him. When Minoru remembered his angry glare from the previous day, though, it was hard to imagine having a friendly exchange with him. Especially when the subject was *Hey, did your test scores drop because of a sudden, inexplicable, and totally unknown medical epidemic?*

Ten minutes left. Unsure of what else to do, Minoru kept following his classmate. If he remembered right, Tsumori had gone to middle school on the north side of Saitama City, so he was likely headed in the opposite direction of Minoru's destination. He had to talk to him before they left the school. *If only there was nobody else around*, he pleaded, but school had just gotten out, so the stairwells and hallways were all full of students.

Tsumori's movements were a bit stiff as he started to head down the stairs. He definitely appeared to be in worse shape than yesterday, but he wasn't wearing a mask, which made the anemia theory that much stronger. If he really had been infected with *H. pylori* bacteria, then he should definitely go to the hospital and get checked out before it got any worse, but would Tsumori listen to someone he viewed as an enemy?

Minoru hesitantly started following him down the stairs when something happened.

"Eek!"

There was a high-pitched shriek from somewhere ahead. Looking down the stairs, Minoru saw that Tsumori was on top of some girl on the landing. Of course, it was clear at a glance that he had crashed

into her and fallen, not done anything on purpose.

“Ah...s-sorry...”

Apologizing in a muffled voice, Tsumori tried to stand up, but he couldn't seem to extract himself. The strap of his shoulder bag was tangled up with the girl's left arm. Seven or eight students had gathered around them, but they were all just frowning or snickering. Nobody offered to help—in fact, one of the boys in the crowd took out his phone to record it.

On impulse, Minoru leaped down the last three steps and pushed his way in, deliberately blocking the boy's view. First, he freed the girl's arm from the bag strap, then helped Tsumori get up. The other boy's skinny frame was lighter than he expected, which made Minoru even more worried, but this was no time to quiz him about his health.

After hesitating a moment, Minoru reached out his free hand to the girl on the floor, but she mumbled “I'm fine” and stood up on her own. With that, she dashed up the stairs and fled. At least she didn't seem to be injured.

Looking back at Tsumori, Minoru spoke out of 70 percent concern and 30 percent calculation.

“Tsumori, you don't seem to be feeling too well. I can take you to the nurse if—”

But before he could finish his sentence, he was interrupted by an unexpected turn of events. Tsumori suddenly raised his right hand and violently shoved Minoru away.

“Mind your own business!!” he shrieked, his high voice drowning out the murmurs of the surrounding students.

Then, after glaring daggers at Minoru through his rimless glasses, Tsumori tottered away down the steps.

Stunned into silence, Minoru stood stock-still for a moment.

“That was unfortunate, eh, Utsugi?”

A voice behind him made him whirl.

Standing on the stairs, leaning lightly on the banister, was Akitoshi Hazama from Class Two. With a refined shrug of the shoulders, he walked up to Minoru, addressing him in a friendly tone.

“Tsumori's been irritable lately, so I'd avoid him if I were you. He hasn't come to math club at all, either.”

“...Math club?”

I didn't know such a club existed..., Minoru thought. Hazama smiled faintly.

“Would you like to come check it out sometime? I'm sure you're more than qualified to join the math club now.”

“Oh, erm...no, I don't really do...clubs...”

Minoru shook his head meekly, though his instinct was to reject the offer more aggressively. *Since when do you need to be “qualified” to*

join a damn school club? Trying to maintain a poker face, he inched away a little.

“Really? Well, that’s too bad.”

Still smiling, Hazama made his trademark gesture of waving two fingers next to his face, then went up the stairs.

What in the world was that? Minoru sighed, then checked the time. He had less than five minutes before he had to leave, so there wasn’t any time to chase Tsumori down and question him. Besides, it didn’t seem like he would be willing to talk right now anyway.

Thinking to himself that he could try again tomorrow, Minoru hurried to the entrance, changed his shoes, and headed to the bike rack area. Just as he was reaching into his pocket for his bike key, his phone started ringing.

He thought it might be Ogu, but when he looked at the screen, the name displayed was Yumiko Azu. Glancing around quickly to be sure there were no other students around, he held the phone to his ear.

“H-hello, this is Utsugi.”

“Where are you right now?”

The Accelerator didn’t bother with so much as a hello. Minoru checked the watch on his left wrist again before he responded.

“Um, I’m just leaving my school now...”

“Don’t you get out at three thirty? What have you been doing for the past ten minutes?”

“I-it’s kind of a long story...”

“Whatever. That works out, actually.”

“Huh?” Minoru had expected the lecture to go on for longer, so this caught him by surprise. “What works out?”

“Leave your bike at school and head north out of the front gate.”

“Huh...? But I won’t make the train without my bike.”

At least not unless I use my Third Eye powers to run there at top speed, but—

Minoru’s thoughts were interrupted by another unexpected statement.

“You don’t need to take the train. Your ride will be waiting for you on the main road.”

“M-my ride? You came to pick me up, Yumiko?”

“No, not me. You’ll see when you get there. Just hurry up!”

With that, she abruptly ended the phone call.

“What in the world...?”

Grumbling as he put away his phone, Minoru left his bike locked up and went toward the gate. Around 70 percent of the students leaving were walking south from the gate, in the direction of the Saitama New Urban Center, but Minoru went north as instructed. He reached the four-lane main road in just a hundred or so meters, where

he stopped and looked around.

True to her word, Yumiko's black Agusta F3 was nowhere to be seen. But this meeting with Liquidizer was a top secret mission that only Yumiko, Minoru, and Olivier knew about, so if Yumiko wasn't coming, that only left Olivier. Could Olivier even drive, though?

There were only three vehicles stopped on this side of the street: a delivery truck, a Lexus SUV, and a Daihatsu Copen. He doubted Olivier would be in any of those.

...Wait, a Copen?

Minoru's eyes widened, and he looked closer at the yellow sports car. The hazard lights were on, but there was nobody inside—or so it appeared. However...

Forcing his frozen legs to move, Minoru walked toward the cute sports car. Just as he reached the side door, it unlocked with a low click.

It wasn't being remote controlled. There was a driver inside. One Minoru couldn't see but wanted to meet again more than anyone else.

Taking a deep breath, Minoru reached out to the passenger-side door and pulled it open. Holding his messenger bag in front of himself, he slid into the low seat. Then, closing the door, he looked first to the front, then at the driver's seat next to him.

Visually, it appeared to be empty, but Minoru knew better. He recognized the faint floral scent. And the warmth he could just barely detect through the air between them.

"...Welcome back, Suu."

Immediately, there was a staticky noise in the air, and someone appeared in the leather seat. Short, fluffy hair that peeked out from under a yellow cap. A small face that was almost breathtakingly beautiful. And violet eyes the color of the sky just before sunrise...

Suu Komura, the SFD member known as the Refractor, looked at Minoru with her head slightly tilted to the side, then responded in a soft near-whisper.

"Thank you, Minoru."

There was a smile on her pale lips, faint but enough to warm Minoru's heart. The same transparent smile had been on her face right before she pushed Minoru in order to free him from the concrete hell they were trapped in together.

Now Suu was right before his eyes again, but she seemed so ephemeral that Minoru was afraid she would disappear if he looked away. He leaned unconsciously toward the driver's seat, then restrained himself.

"When did you get out of the hospital...? Is it safe for you to be moving now?"

"I was released just this morning. The bones in my head are all

healed now, so it's fine. Although I'll be wearing this hat until my hair grows back over the scars from the stitches."

She touched the brim of her yellow cap. Then she raised it just a little bit and nodded to him.

"I'm sorry I didn't contact you sooner... I wanted to thank you in person."

"N-no, you don't need to apologize...but after such a major head injury, shouldn't you be resting at headquarters for a while...?"

Suu smiled at his concern and shook her head.

"The internal bleeding has completely stopped, and they said my brain waves are normal again. The doctor was surprised, too... Minoru, do you remember when you brought me into your shell at the hospital...?"

"...Yeah."

"When you did that, something touched my head... It almost felt like someone's hand. It felt like it reached right into my brain and removed the hematoma that they couldn't operate on. I know it sounds hard to believe, but that's how it seemed to me."

Minoru shook his head slowly. "No, I believe you. I felt the same thing...like there was someone else inside the shell with you and me. The shell was only two centimeters around our bodies, but...I know I felt another presence there."

"Amazing, isn't it?"

Suu moved closer to Minoru, looking straight into his eyes from a close distance as she whispered, "I don't know who that presence was who healed my injury, but it was you who saved me, Minoru. Thank you."

Then she reached out with both hands, wrapped her arms around Minoru, and pulled him into a tight embrace.

It would be a lie to say Minoru wasn't startled at all. But his feelings of relief and affection were far stronger, and so he instinctively put his arms around Suu and hugged her back.

They were in the opposite direction of the station, but the car was still only a hundred meters away from the school, so it was possible a student might walk by and notice Minoru in the car. But in that moment, all such anxieties were far from his mind. Minoru simply held Suu, carving every last emotion it entailed deep into his memories.

The engine wasn't running, so the only sound was the quiet beep of the blinking hazard lights. The sound of Minoru's heart and Suu's breath seemed to match its beat.

After a few seconds, or maybe even minutes, a small voice tickled his left ear.

"I'd like to stay like this longer, but...if we don't leave soon, we

won't get to the operation in time."

"The operation..."

Only then did Minoru finally remember the important mission that was coming up in just two hours' time. And then the fact that Suu shouldn't be here with them.

Looking up, Minoru blinked a few times, then responded in a slightly shrill voice.

"W...wait, what are you doing here exactly, Suu? Do you know what this mission is?"

But Suu simply smiled, withdrawing from the embrace and settling back into the driver's seat.

"I'll explain on the way. Just put your seat belt on for now, please."

"Um...right."

Minoru nodded. His messenger bag had fallen to his feet, so he returned it to his knees and clicked his seat belt into place. Suu pressed the ignition button, and the engine roared to life.

Gliding smoothly onto the road, the Copen entered the right lane and quickly started to gain speed. *Wait, isn't Suu still a third-year in middle school? Where did she learn to drive—and doesn't she have high school entrance exams coming up...?*

Minoru's thoughts spun, but only until the moment the car pulled onto the expressway. Taking the New Urban Center west ramp onto the Saitama-Omiya Route, the Copen sped up even more, passing other vehicles one after another despite its small size.

Why do all of the female SFD members drive so darn fast?!

Letting out a silent scream in his mind, Minoru clung tight to his bag.

The Copen traveled from the Saitama-Omiya Route on the Shuto Expressway to the Central Circular Route, then took the South Hatsudai exit ramp back onto the local roads.

In total, it took only about thirty minutes. Even with the time left to get to Harajuku Station, he would easily be early for the five o'clock meeting time.

Along the way, Suu gave a simple explanation for why she had come to pick up Minoru: After she was discharged from the hospital at ten that morning, DD drove her back to SFD Headquarters. She dropped off her things in her room and went to the multipurpose break room on the fifth floor, but the Professor was nowhere to be found, and DD had gone back to base. Suu decided to sit at the *kotatsu*, still invisible, and wait for the Professor to return.

At the Professor's request, Minoru had just taken out the *kotatsu* and assembled it a few days ago, so it had been a long time since Suu had gotten to enjoy its warmth, and she soon found herself dozing off. When she woke up, Yumiko and Olivier were in the room; she was still trying to recover from her sleepy state and greet them when she overheard parts of their conversation.

Liquidizer. Trancer. Stinger. It was only after she'd heard all these names that she'd become fully conscious again and deactivated her invisibility. She'd pressed the startled pair to tell her what they were talking about, learned about the deal, and requested—basically threatened them, she explained—that they let her be part of the mission, which was how she wound up giving Minoru a ride.

“...So basically, Yumiko and Oli-V were being careless...”

Minoru shook his head, and Suu chuckled quietly.

“Well, I *was* invisible...although I did use my ‘I’m here’ cushion.”

“Then it’s not your fault. But why did you want to be part of it? I’m sure we’ll get in trouble with the Professor later, if not worse...”

Suu didn’t answer right away, just slowed the Copen. She turned left at Tomigaya Crossing toward Harajuku, then stopped at the next red light.

“I am an SFD member...but Yumiko and Olivier are my friends. That’s even more important, I think.”

She spoke so quietly that Minoru could barely hear, so he glanced in her direction. Suu was gripping the steering wheel with both hands and facing straight forward, but her face under the cap looked just the

tiniest bit red.



Suu Komura, the Refractor, had one other power besides her Third Eye ability to deflect any light that touched her body—and that was a power that could only be described as actual telepathy. She could see other people’s “sight lines,” as well as the emotions that accompanied them, which had in the past made her fear even her own parents, to the point where she said she had considered suicide.

Given her history, it must have taken a lot of courage for her to call someone a friend.

“...I see.”

Minoru nodded, but then Suu bopped him lightly on the elbow with her small fist.

“Huh...?” Not understanding the gesture, Minoru looked to his right once more. The signal had turned green, so Suu started driving again before she spoke in a slightly displeased tone.

“That’s where you’re supposed to say, ‘Wait, I’m not your friend?’”

“Wha...?”

Only then did Minoru finally realize that Suu had said that Yumiko and Olivier were her friends but didn’t mention Minoru’s own name.

“Erm...I-I’m not your friend...?”

“Too late. I’m not answering now.”

“C-come on...”

Suu grinned mischievously for just a moment, then pressed down hard on the gas.

Once she dropped Minoru off at the south side of the train platform reserved exclusively for the Imperial family at Harajuku Station, Suu drove off to the north in the Copen.

She couldn’t participate in the discussion with Liquidizer, so they had agreed that she would keep an eye on the surrounding area. Still, that didn’t mean they were safe—if this was a Ruby Eye trap, it meant Suu might have to face an enemy ambush alone. Minoru was worried about the idea of Suu fighting when she was fresh out of the hospital, but she responded by showing him the Taser and handgun that were hidden in her cute letterman jacket.

That’s a little worrying in its own right..., he thought as he watched the Copen leave, then checked his watch. It was 4:45 p.m. Despite it being a weekday, the streets were full of stylish young men and women.

Minoru had never hung out in Harajuku before, so he couldn’t help feeling a little overwhelmed, but this was no time to let himself get distracted. He bought a bottle of mineral water at a nearby vending machine, stuffed it into his bag, and went to the Takeshita

ticket gate, where he was supposed to meet Yumiko.

Naturally, the sidewalks around the station were bustling with people, making it all but impossible to walk in a straight line. Minoru took deep breaths through his nose as he made his way toward the ticket gate, making sure there was no scent of Ruby Eyes.

Finding Yumiko in this huge crowd won't be easy, he thought, but evidently, he was worried for nothing. A hand suddenly reached out from right beside him and grabbed on to his arm firmly.

"OMG, you're sooo laaaate!"

Minoru's first reaction to the shrill voice was to exclaim *You've got the wrong person!* but he managed to stop himself. The uniformed high school girl hanging off his right arm really was the Accelerator, Yumiko Azu.

Wh...what's going on?! he mouthed silently.

"Just go with it!" she hissed.

How am I supposed to do that? Minoru thought, but then he glanced over and saw two grimly dressed men glaring at him appraisingly nearby. Quickly looking away, Minoru let Yumiko drag him along to walk in the other direction.

"...Who were those guys?"

"Pickup artists."

"...Ah."

Now Minoru understood: Those men must have seen Yumiko waiting alone by the gate and tried to talk to her, so she was pretending that she and Minoru were a couple in order to shake them off. *They're lucky they escaped with their lives*, he thought, but he decided to keep that to himself and asked a different question instead.

"Why did you pick this area to meet up anyway? You must've known those sorts of people would be hanging around..."

"Oh, shut up. I don't know Harajuku very well, okay? Besides, crowds reduce the danger of potential surprise attacks."

Yumiko sounded irritated, but she still hung on to Minoru's arm as they headed south. Passing through the retro ticket gate of the Omotesandou exit, they turned right at the Jingu Bashi intersection. Once the large trees of Yoyogi Park came into view, she finally let go of his arm.

As Yumiko sighed in relief, Minoru glanced over to see that her anger had mostly been replaced by extreme tension. Without thinking, he lightly touched the arm that had just released him.

"Yumiko...there's still an hour until the meeting. You can't stay this stressed the entire time."

The Accelerator shot him a scowl. "We're meeting up with Liquidizer, the most sinister Ruby we know. Of course I'm tense. If anything, how is it *you* can be so *calm*?"

“Huh...?”

Now that she mentioned it, Minoru realized he wasn't experiencing any of the stomach pain or shortness of breath that he always felt before a mission. In fact, even the stinging nervousness that had held him in its clutches throughout his encounter with Liquidizer the previous day had vanished somehow.

“Um...maybe because we're not fighting today, I guess?”

“You don't know that! If negotiations break down, she might try to wipe out all of us on the spot.”

“Ah, yeah, I guess so...”

Minoru nodded, but for some reason, he suspected that wouldn't be the case.

Still, it was true that they were meeting up with someone who had tried to kill them in the past. This was hardly a situation in which he should let his guard down.

“...If it comes to that, I'll hold Liquidizer off, so please retreat with Oli-V.”

Yumiko just harrumphed. “I'm not such a coward that I would sacrifice you and run away.”

As if to prove her bravery, Yumiko led the way into Yoyogi Park with confident strides.

The half-circle-shaped plaza, which was surrounded by trees with leafless branches, had more than a few people milling around. Students sitting on benches and eating, families walking their dogs, elderly people with oversize cameras... There were certainly plenty of people to be suspicious of, but they couldn't exactly go around sniffing all of them.

“If DD were here, he'd be able to see if there was an ambush right away...”

“He'd smell it, not see it. Although I suppose he is the only SFD member with an enemy-detecting ability...but we have no choice but to do without him today. If we brought more than the three people Liquidizer requested and she found out, she would probably refuse to meet with us.”

“Right, of course...”

In that case, even having Suu Komura come along last-minute was risky, but she was capable of making herself completely invisible. As long as she wasn't in a soundless room or something, it would be impossible to detect her—at least, they had no choice but to believe that.

Checking his watch again, Minoru saw that it had only just passed five o'clock.

“We still have almost an hour...”

Yumiko looked at him as if to say *So what?* “We can't just have

Komura check for an ambush all by herself. Let's walk around the park, too."

"Sure, but...what if we run into Liquidizer on the way?"

"We'll just pretend not to notice her."

"...A-all right, then."

I guess that is the only choice, Minoru thought as he followed his teammate into the park.

According to the information he'd researched earlier on his phone, Yoyogi Park was about fifty-four hectares large, making it the fifth-largest park in the twenty-three wards of Tokyo. It was divided into north and south sections by a wide road; section B to the south contained soccer fields, basketball courts, and running tracks, while section A to the north contained woods, plazas, water fountains, and so on. As the name implied, the central plaza area Liquidizer had chosen was in the dead center of section A.

As they walked toward that area to start with, there were more people in the park than Minoru had expected. It was already somewhat dark out, since it was past five on a midwinter day, but the atmosphere was considerably different from Amagase Park, the park closest to Minoru's home.

"...Where are we meeting up with Oli-V?"

"In front of the fountain at ten to six."

"Wait...so we're staying separate for another fifty minutes? But why...?"

"So that we can check a wider area, of course. Really, you and I should probably be checking separate areas, too, but you don't have a weapon."

"Uh-huh..." All Minoru could do was nod in response to her serious expression.

It was true that aside from Olivier, a sword user, all the SFD members were equipped with stun guns, firearms, and so on. Even Suu carried a gun, despite being in middle school, so why had the topic never come up with Minoru?

As if reading his thoughts, Yumiko said lowly, "If you want to carry one, you should, too. Though you'll have to do an awful lot of training first. It's just...handguns and Tasers aren't very well suited to your ability, are they? I think that's why the Professor hasn't tried to insist that you carry a weapon."

"Well suited..."

Minoru mumbled reflexively before he understood. If he tried to activate his protective shell while holding a gun, the weapon would probably go flying—and even if he could bring it into the shell, firing it would just cause the bullet to bounce right back at Minoru. A Taser would have a similar problem. He would have to deactivate his shell

to use either, which he supposed would defeat the purpose of having Jet Eye abilities in the first place.

“Hrrmm... I think I’ll stick with fighting unarmed for now...”

“I thought so,” Yumiko said bluntly, nodding. But then she seemed to reconsider that her words might have sounded harsh. “But in your case, you serve as an excellent tank with those powers of yours, so you shouldn’t worry too much about carrying a gun.”

“...A tank?”

“You can ask Oli-V what it means later. Anyway, we should head to the central plaza now...try and check out the people in the area.”

“R-right.”

Minoru obediently glanced to his left and right, but he couldn’t help wondering: *Did she just try to make me feel better...?*

Minoru and Yumiko took their time, walking the kilometer around the central plaza for about twenty minutes. A third of the people they passed were joggers, a third were couples or families, and a third were less readily identifiable, but they never detected anyone who seemed suspicious, never mind the scent of a Ruby Eye.

If Liquidizer’s deal really was a Syndicate trap, and they were trying to take out Minoru, Yumiko, and Olivier in one fell swoop, they would need to have a fair number of Ruby Eyes positioned around the area accordingly. It was hard to imagine that not a single one of them would show up on their radar.

But Yumiko wasn’t satisfied with one trip around, and she walked right past the fountain where they were supposed to meet up with Olivier, starting a second round of searching. As they walked, the sky gradually darkened to a deep indigo, making it harder to see people clearly from a distance. Focusing on his sense of smell while he walked, Minoru began to feel like a wild animal.

Suddenly, he remembered what Liquidizer had said to him when they parted the day before.

It’s faint, but...you have an interesting smell, boy.

Feeling a bit unsettled, Minoru tugged at his uniform sleeve to sniff himself, earning a suspicious look from Yumiko.

“What in the world are you doing?”

“Oh, erm...I was just wondering if I was smelly at all...”

“Excuse me? Why would you be worried about that right now? Don’t tell me it’s because we’re meeting Liquidizer soon?”

“N-no, of course not. Or, well, I guess it kind of is... Yesterday, she...”

But Minoru stopped there. He suddenly heard loud, deliberate footsteps behind him.

When he and Yumiko whirled around in unison, they saw a man

approaching them wearing a black leather jacket, denim jeans ripped beyond their limit, a loose knit cap, and leather engineer boots. On top of all that, he had a guitar case slung over his left shoulder.

Who is that?! Minoru was on guard for a moment, but then the man raised the brim of his cap, revealing a handsome face underneath. It was Olivier.

“...What kind of idiotic outfit is that?”

Olivier looked a little mortified. “It’s the perfect disguise for carrying a sword in the heart of Harajuku, that’s what. Certainly suits me better than a fisherman or a kendo club member, no?”

“If the police question us, I’m pretending I don’t know you,” Yumiko announced, before growing serious again. “So did you find anyone suspicious?”

“Not at all. What about you?”

“Same here. And Komura hasn’t sent us a warning, so perhaps this isn’t a trap after all.”

“Hrmm...”

Olivier quickly scanned the area, prompting Minoru to instinctively do the same. Their current location was a fountain area at the south side of the central plaza. The four-cornered fountain square was adjacent to a large lake and equipped with ten or so benches, most of which were occupied by couples. Of course, just as Minoru and Yumiko had done at Harajuku Station before, Ruby Eyes could easily pretend to be couples. But from this short distance, surely the Jet Eyes would sense them.

“...Still, this is Liquidizer we’re talking about. Don’t let your guards down.”

Olivier pulled down his knit cap, and Yumiko nodded.

“Of course... Only five minutes left. We should probably get going.”

At those words, Minoru finally began to feel nervous. His mouth was running dry, so he pulled the water bottle out of his messenger bag and took several gulps; when he looked up, Yumiko was holding out her right hand.

“Me too, please.”

“Erm...right, of course.”

If they did this in a high school classroom, everyone would tease them...or chatter about it, at the very least. *But I’m an SFD member right now, not a student*, he reminded himself firmly as he held out the bottle. Yumiko accepted it calmly, took a few sips, then looked at Olivier. The sword user shook his head, so she replaced the cap and returned the bottle to Minoru.

Putting it away in his bag, he exchanged glances with the other two. They nodded at one another and began to walk in silence.

Together, the three walked across the bridge over the pond, heading toward the central plaza. During flower-viewing season, the place was evidently so packed that you had to stake out spots in advance, but in January even the grass had withered to a pale brown, making for a truly wintry scene. When they left the path and stepped into the plaza, there was no one else around.

The area outside Harajuku Station was too crowded to walk through, but this place is only a few minutes away, and it's completely empty, Minoru wondered, a little surprised. The area certainly did reduce the threat of an ambush, and there were no cameras to monitor them.

As they walked shoulder to shoulder with Olivier in the middle, the trio reached the middle of the plaza. The light of sundown had already faded from the sky, but thanks to the streetlights of Shibuya and Harajuku, not to mention his Third Eye, Minoru's vision was still clear. Liquidizer was nowhere to be seen in the windswept plaza.

...No, wait.

As Minoru and the others approached the center from the south, there was a single silhouette approaching opposite them from the north. Yumiko and Olivier, who'd been walking ahead of him, slowed down. Minoru slowed his pace as well, squinting at the figure.

".....?"

It was a woman—but she carried a battered tote bag in her left hand and a white shopping bag in her right, and she wore a maroon down coat and a beige muffler, looking in every way like an ordinary housewife. *Maybe she lives nearby and is taking a shortcut through the plaza,* Minoru thought, relaxing his shoulders. But then...

"It's her," Yumiko muttered in a low voice, and Olivier nodded.

The two of them stopped, and the housewife-like figure stopped as well. There was about five meters of distance between them, too far to make out the person's face very clearly.

But then the woman started walking again. She strode slowly, as if checking the ground beneath her with every step, gradually drawing closer to them. Yumiko rested her right hand on her Taser, and Olivier moved the guitar case from his back to his side. She was only four meters away...three meters...two meters.

"Bonsoir."

It was only when her fluent French reached his ears that Minoru was finally convinced. Though she carried herself exactly like a tired housewife and looked more than ten years older than the high school student he'd spoken with the previous day, the pair of eyes glittering sharply beneath those slightly tousled bangs undoubtedly belonged to Liquidizer. As soon as their eyes met, goose bumps rose on Minoru's arms, and he nearly activated his protective shield before he managed to stop himself.

“...So is that a disguise? Or your real self?”

Yumiko, on the other hand, seemed perfectly calm as she asked the question. Liquidizer fluttered her mascara-laden eyelashes and responded in Japanese. “That information isn’t part of the deal, I’m afraid.”

“At least tell us what’s in those shopping bags, then.”

The woman seemed unruffled by the interrogation. “Groceries, that’s all. I bought them at the supermarket in Sangubashi.”

“Why would you buy food on your way to a meetup like this?”

“Partly for camouflage, partly for practical reasons, I suppose. Even I get hungry, you know.”

She smiled blandly behind her scarf. But then her face was serious again, and she nodded lightly. “I suppose I should thank you for accepting my request, first of all. It doesn’t seem like you’ve brought your little friends from the SFD, the Self-Defense Whatsit, or Public Security, unless perhaps that invisible girl is here, I suppose. And even if she is, you should make sure she doesn’t push herself while she’s still recovering, hmm?”

Immediately, Minoru felt a low burn in the pit of his stomach. Suu had sustained major head injuries to break out of Liquidizer’s concrete trap. But he managed to stay calm, reminding himself that it had only happened because they infiltrated the Syndicate hideout in the first place.

He would have expected that to make Yumiko angry, too, but it didn’t show on her face.

“Your advice is appreciated. So it seems you were serious about making a deal, then.”

“But of course. I wouldn’t go all the way to silly old Saitama just to set up some overly complicated trap.”

“Well, sorry for your trouble,” Minoru grumbled without thinking.

Liquidizer’s lips quirked. “Oh, I actually quite liked it. It’s so spacious—you can really see the sky there, hmm?”

“You’re still making fun of it, aren’t you...?”

The exchange relaxed the tension ever so slightly, until—

“Where is Stargazer?”

—Olivier, who had been silent until then, cut in with one short demand.

His left hand was on the buckle of the guitar case, ready to fling it open at a moment’s notice. Inside, no doubt, was not a guitar but his beloved long sword. It was a weapon that would be powerless against Liquidizer, who could melt anything, but he had to show his determination somehow.

The same was likely true of Liquidizer. She needed to touch something with her palm to liquefy it, but she was wearing thick

gloves and holding bags in both hands, likely to show that she didn't intend to attack them.

Still, she clearly had no intention of buttering them up, either. Her smile vanished, and the Ruby focused her cold eyes on Olivier.

"Let's take this one step at a time, shall we? You answer one of my questions, I'll answer one of yours. How's that?"

"...Fine."

"Then I'll be nice and answer one of yours first. Stargazer...your little sister...is in the Ruby Eye Syndicate's main headquarters."

"Then where is the...?" Olivier was leaning forward, but he trailed off, most likely remembering the agreement.

Instead, Yumiko spoke next. "So what's your question?"

"Where is Trancer?"

Liquidizer's question mirrored Olivier's perfectly, but Yumiko didn't answer right away. She was probably reluctant to leak confidential SFD information, even if they had agreed to negotiate. But there was no turning back now.

"...He's in a hospital that backs the SFD."

She answered in a hard voice, giving only part of the information.

Liquidizer nodded, and Olivier took another half step forward. Minoru expected him to resume his question from before, but instead he asked something new.

"And where is Stinger?"

Liquidizer looked surprised by this, too. But instead of commenting, she raised her right hand, still holding the tote bag.

"As I explained to the boy yesterday, I can only get an approximate sense of what direction he's in. But he hasn't moved these past few days, so I've been able to narrow it down considerably. He's currently hiding out somewhere in Minami-Azabu."

"Minami-Azabu..." Olivier muttered.

Minoru leaned over to Yumiko. "Um, where is that again?" he whispered.

"North of Hiroo, south of Shirokane." She turned to Liquidizer. "Can't you narrow it down any further?"

Lowering her arm again, the Ruby Eye shrugged. "Of course, if I get close enough. But then I run the risk of him noticing me."

"...I see."

Yumiko nodded, and Liquidizer's expression turned cool once more.

"My turn again... Tell me the exact location of the hospital where Trancer is being held."

This time, she probably wasn't just hesitating because it was classified. If Liquidizer attacked the hospital—specifically, the eleventh floor of NCAM—then there might be casualties among the

staff and guards. Although they were trading information to rescue Olivier's sister, that didn't mean sacrificing the lives of innocent citizens was acceptable.

Liquidizer stared at Yumiko's visible hesitance. "Is this the end of our deal, then?"

"No...we'll keep going." Yumiko's voice sounded strained. "But promise me something. That if I tell you where the hospital is, you won't attack it by force."

"...Surely you can't be serious?"

The bags in Liquidizer's hands fell to the ground. Cold, violent intent rolled off her from her suede boots. Yumiko quickly jumped back, and Olivier threw open the guitar case. Minoru nearly activated his shell but just barely stopped himself.

Liquidizer stared piercingly into each of their eyes as the three of them stood ready to fight.

"You agreed to this deal so that you could steal Stargazer back 'by force,' did you not? Is there some reason why I can't do the same thing, pray tell?"

".....No, there isn't." Yumiko stood up straight from her tense crouch. "It's just a request. Besides...even you most likely won't be able to just break in and rescue Trancer. The hospital in question has an incredibly advanced defense system, including two-hundred-megapascal water jets."

Liquidizer's expression didn't change, but her murderous aura lessened, and she picked up the tote and shopping bag from the ground.

"...I see. I suppose even I can't do much against high-pressure water jets... But I thought the cutting range for such things was only a few centimeters at the most? Even if they came down from the ceiling, would that really kill the person below?"

"Shall I count that as your next question?"

Liquidizer smiled dryly. "*Non*, no need to answer that one. I'm sure they've devised some way to make it lethal... I understand the hospital is well protected, then, but that doesn't change my answer. I cannot promise that I won't attack it... That's why I proposed this deal, after all."

"....."

Yumiko took a sharp breath, as if to say something else, but no words came.

Liquidizer had just declared that she would invade enemy territory alone to rescue Trancer, even if it meant risking her life. If she was that determined, then there was nothing else they could say to dissuade her.

The heavy silence continued for a moment, until finally Liquidizer

opened her mouth. She was probably about to say they should cut off the negotiations now, but someone else spoke first.

“No, that’s wrong.”

It was Olivier, closing the buckle of the guitar case again as he spoke.

“...What do you mean?”

“You didn’t propose this deal to attack the hospital. You did it to get Trancer back, right?”

His voice was low and hoarse. Liquidizer blinked slowly before she answered.

“And how exactly is that any different?”

“It is... ’Cause I’ll help you save Trancer.”

Minoru and Yumiko stared at Olivier’s face in shocked silence. Liquidizer seemed to be just as surprised: She murmured a presumably French exclamation, “*Oh là là...*,” before reverting to Japanese.

“Divider, do you have any idea what you’re saying? Leaking information is one thing, but if you do something like that, you’ll be the one they lock up next. They might even assume you’ve been brainwashed and remove your Third Eye.”

“I don’t care...as long as we’ve got Claire back by then.”

Using his sister’s real name, not her code name, Olivier looked at Yumiko and then Minoru. His expression was calm, but there was a glint of pain in his blue-gray eyes.

The Trancer, Ryuu Mikawa, was one of the perpetrators of Claire Saito’s kidnapping, so Olivier had viewed him as a mortal enemy ever since. He had even requested to be present for Trancer’s Third Eye removal, probably so that he could see his foe’s last moments—as a Ruby Eye, at least.

So naturally, Minoru was surprised that he would volunteer to help rescue Trancer, but at the same time he felt like he understood. He could relate to the feeling of being willing to do anything to save your sister. In fact, it struck him as the only thing to do. And so...

“I’ll help, too.”

Olivier raised his eyebrows at Minoru. “Seriously, Isolator? No point in you putting yourself in danger like that.”

“But surely two people are more likely to succeed than one. And that will probably be more convincing for Ms. Liquidizer to cooperate, too, right?”

“Listen, dude...”

Olivier started to object further, then closed his mouth. Yumiko had stepped forward, raising her hands and shaking her head.

“Well, I suppose now I have to say that three people would be even better.”

Minoru and Olivier both tried to argue with her, but no words

came to mind. As the three stared at one another grimly, Liquidizer looked at them and heaved a long sigh.

“Goodness, you lot are exhausting. But if you’re offering to help me, I’m not going to flat-out refuse, of course. However...”

Her eyes regained their sharpness, and she looked deep into each of their eyes in turn.

“What, exactly, do you intend to do? Rush the hospital in my stead and get Trancer out for me?”

Minoru had assumed that was the plan as well, but Olivier quickly shook his head. “No, that’d still end in casualties. I don’t want anyone getting hurt over this. Trancer’s being taken out of the hospital and transferred somewhere else late tonight. We’re gonna go after that car.”

“What...?” Yumiko was the first to respond. “Transferred?! This is the first I’m hearing about such a thing. How in the world do you know about this?”

“Cause it’s Searcher and me who are supposed to protect the car. I just got the order an hour ago. I hadn’t heard anything about the transfer till then, either.”

“An hour ago?!” Yumiko glanced at her watch and back at Olivier in disbelief. “But that’s far too sudden. What is the Pr...commander thinking?!”

It’s probably safe to say “professor” instead of “commander,” Minoru thought absently, but Olivier shook his head.

“The order’s not from the commander; it’s from way higher up. Probably the same ones who had Isolator sent to you-know-where.”

“.....”

Minoru heard Yumiko grind her teeth.

“You-know-where” was undoubtedly the Tokyo Bay Nuclear Power Plant. The order to have Minoru slip into the reactor had evidently come from higher-ups in the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare, which was in charge of the SFD. If this was the work of the same unknown HLW top brass, then where in the world were they taking Trancer, and why?

As the tension deepened, Liquidizer’s low voice only made it worse. “I highly doubt the place they’re bringing him is going to have less security than the hospital. So I really don’t think I can let you handle this on your own. I’m joining the attack on the car, too.”

“...As long as the car is the only thing you melt.”

“I can’t make any promises, but I shall do my best.”

Olivier scowled at this response, but he nodded.

From the sound of things, Minoru would be participating in a mission tonight that involved working with Liquidizer to rescue Trancer from a car being guarded by DD, who knew nothing about

what was going on. It was bound to be chaotic, no matter what plans they made, and he would probably be fired from the SFD and even have his Third Eye removed afterward. Naturally, this meant his arrangement for Chief Himi to erase Minoru from the memories of the people around him would be rendered moot, too.

But even so, he still wanted to do everything in his power to help Olivier save his little sister. If Minoru's late sister, Wakaba, were here, surely she would say the same.

"...All right, then it's our turn to ask a question next." Olivier had sunk into silence, so Yumiko spoke up. "Where is the headquarters where Stargazer is being kept?"

"...I can't tell you the exact location," Liquidizer responded in a whisper.

Yumiko's sharp voice immediately cut over her. "What are you playing at?! You're the one who suggested this deal!"

"I know that, but I still can't say. Because..."

But they weren't able to find out her reason.

Liquidizer suddenly fell back on the ground, as if someone had swept her legs from behind. Her shopping bags hit the ground with a dull *thud*.

At first, Minoru assumed she'd either been sniped from a distance or attacked by an invisible Suu. But less than five seconds later, he discovered that neither of those things was the case.

The feeling of the ground beneath the soles of his sneakers suddenly vanished. It felt as if he were standing on smoothly polished ice—no, as if someone had poured oil on top of that ice to make it doubly slippery. Unable to keep his balance, Minoru fell forward. He tried to catch himself with his hands, but his palms slipped along the surface the same way, leaving him to topple over.

Yumiko and Olivier went down at the same time, shouting and struggling.

"Wh...what is this?!"

"Damn it, why's it so slippery?!"

Minoru checked over the surface of the ground as he tried desperately to stand up.

There had been a lawn underfoot just moments ago, but now there wasn't a single blade of grass to be seen. Instead, the ground was covered with a glossy, dark-gray, vinyl-like substance. The area it covered was at least twenty meters in diameter. The film was soft yet impossible for the hand to grasp—his fingers slid right off the surface no matter how hard he tried to grab or poke through it.

It would've been impossible to slide something like this under their feet without the four of them noticing. Which meant this must be

“A Third Eye’s ability...!”

Minoru’s muttered exclamation was followed up with more information from Liquidizer, the only one who wasn’t struggling.

“This is Lubricator’s power...!”

Minoru had never heard this code name. Evidently, neither had Yumiko or Olivier, both of whom glared at Liquidizer from the ground.

“You called in backup?!” Yumiko accused.

Liquidizer quickly shook her head. “No, I came alone. More importantly, we have to get out of here fast...”

She quickly turned her head to the right. Struggling to keep herself steady, she raised her right hand when suddenly—there was a sharp noise from far away, and the palm of Liquidizer’s glove dissolved into liquid and scattered. Tiny beads rolled around before Minoru’s eyes. The brown ones were the synthetic fiber that had been liquefied by Liquidizer’s ability. And the dully glinting metallic beads...those had been a bullet until just seconds ago.

Someone really had shot at them this time.

Minoru quickly looked in the direction the shot had come from. There was someone there, in a zelkova tree on the north end of the plaza. It was dark, and they were over fifty meters away, so Minoru could only make out their silhouette, but they didn’t seem to have a large rifle. But it should be all but impossible to land accurate fire on someone from that distance using a handgun, shouldn’t it?

As if in mockery of Minoru’s thoughts, the distant figure raised both hands. There were three small flashes of light in rapid succession, a faint whizzing sound, and then—Liquidizer’s hands blocked the bullets. She managed to liquefy the first two shots with her right hand, but her shoulder sent up a billow of white snow-like feathers from her down coat.

“Ngh...”

She went down with a small grunt of pain, sliding toward Minoru on the vinyl-like film. In the battle in Minami-Aoyama, Liquidizer had managed to liquefy all the bullets Yumiko fired without touching them directly. Why wasn’t she able to do that now?

Full of uncertainty, Minoru caught Liquidizer and inspected the wound on her shoulder. The white feathers leaking from the hole in her coat started to turn dark.

Looking up, Minoru saw that the person in the zelkova tree was preparing their weapon for the third time.

Wearing a ghastly expression, Liquidizer raised her right hand again.

“.....!!”

Half because they couldn’t lose their source of information and

half out of pure instinct, Minoru pulled Liquidizer behind him and activated his protective shell.

As he was enveloped in a world of silence, the attacker's muzzle flashed three times. Kneeling, Minoru saw sparks hit his chest twice and his face once. He couldn't feel them at all, but it was easy to grasp that the bullets had hit his shell, gotten crushed, and bounced off.

If he'd been one second later in activating the shell, Minoru would be dead.

Gritting his teeth after that realization, Minoru spread his arms as wide as he could, trying to protect the three people behind him. The surface of the shell offered no friction whatsoever, and the vinyl-like film that covered the ground was also frighteningly low friction. According to the professor's analysis, he was unconsciously hardening the space beneath the soles of his feet when he walked in the shell, but that didn't seem to be working right now. He felt unstable, as if his whole body were being held up by magnetism.

Nonetheless, Minoru braced himself with the determination to prevent the other three from being hurt.

But then the far-off shooter lowered the gun and started walking right toward them. When the attacker was about thirty meters away, Minoru could finally make out their appearance.

The person was thin and tall. He wore a gray trench coat and a black suit, complete with a necktie. A fedora the same color as his coat was pulled low over his eyes, and the face underneath—couldn't be seen. Not because it was dark but because his entire face was covered with some kind of thin mask.

No detective would dress like that, and even if they did, they certainly wouldn't be allowed to fire at people without warning. And the large gun hanging from his right hand was equipped with a suppressor.

That could only mean that the man in the trench coat was a Ruby. He must have learned about this meeting and come to interfere. And the vinyl film that had stolen the group's power of movement was undoubtedly his ability.

Minoru didn't know why he hadn't smelled the Ruby Eye, but he could think about that later. Right now, they had to do something about this man, who clearly intended to kill all of them.

As his mind raced, Minoru saw something in the far-right corner of his vision.

Yumiko was holding her gun beneath Minoru's spread right arm. *How is she holding herself steady on this frictionless vinyl?* he wondered, then realized that she was lying across the prone Liquidizer's stomach. Neither of them was probably happy about having such close contact with a mortal enemy, but no doubt they were both in agreement that

they had to do whatever it took to survive.

The small suppresser-equipped automatic pistol, which Yumiko held in both hands, fired off two yellow flashes. The man in the trench coat was only twenty meters away from them now. A sharpshooter like Yumiko wouldn't miss from that distance.

Sure enough, he saw the material of the man's coat tear open on his chest and side.

But while the man stumbled a little, he didn't stop walking. Yumiko fired again, and the bullet appeared to strike the man's left cheek, but he still kept walking.

Now he was fifteen meters away.

Arriving near the edge of the vinyl film that had trapped the four of them, the man in the trench coat raised his large pistol and aimed to Minoru's left—at the part of Liquidizer's body that was protruding from the cover of his protective shell.

Yumiko fired again at the same time as the man did. Minoru threw himself into the bullet's path and managed to block it with his shell, but he was knocked down onto the vinyl again. He frantically scrambled to stand, but there was zero friction between his protective shell and the slick vinyl surface, so he couldn't hold himself up in the slightest.

I won't be able to block the next shot!

Just as Minoru gritted his teeth—

—there was a violent bluish-white flash at the trench coat man's back. The discharge from a Taser.

The man bent over as the high-ampere shock coursed through him, but he still managed to whirl around and hold up the gun in his right hand. Minoru clearly saw the hand strike something invisible.

There in the darkness, a small frame flickered into view. Suu Komura staggered and fell onto the lawn. Recovering from the electric shock, the man pointed his gun at Suu.

“NOOOOO!”

Minoru screamed inside the shell and struggled to run toward her. Yumiko fired her gun repeatedly, hitting the man several times, but it didn't bring him down.

Just as the muzzle of his gun aimed toward Suu's head—a silver flash flew through the air and pierced the man's right arm.

It was a sword. The Western-style long sword, which Olivier must have thrown, cut deeply into the man's upper arm. The gun dropped, and Suu caught it in midair, putting her fingers around it in one smooth movement and firing repeatedly at the man as he fell.

Shot at such a point-blank range, even the man in the trench coat staggered around heavily, his fedora flying off into the air. Wrapped in a gray mask, his exposed face appeared to have no eyes or mouth.

But the man still didn't go down. He was unbelievably tough, even for a Third Eye holder. As he stumbled backward unsteadily, he pulled out the sword that was lodged in his right arm. Then he tossed the sword aside, turned, and ran away at a speed unthinkable for someone who had just been gravely injured.

The man's back shrank into the darkness and disappeared.

Minoru deactivated his protective shell and put his hands on the ground. Instead of the slippery surface, he felt something grainy and soft. He wanted to see what had happened, but that wasn't as important right now.

"A...are you all right?!"

Trying to hold back his panic, Minoru turned toward Liquidizer, who was still on the ground behind him. Holding her left shoulder with her hand, she smiled darkly as she responded. "I'm fine, boy. Go check on your invisible girl."

"R...right!"

Minoru jumped up and hurried over to Suu, who was lying a few dozen feet away. She didn't seem to be bleeding, but she was clutching the side of her head where the man must have struck her.

"S... Refractor, are you okay?!"

Suu grimaced and gave a small nod. "I'm fine. It's just a little bump."

"But you just had surgery there. We have to get you to the hospital..."

"It can wait."

With that, Suu reached out her left hand to Minoru. He took it and gently pulled her up. Once Suu was on her feet, she shook her head lightly to test the degree of pain, then looked down at the gun that was still in her right hand.

"A SOCOM pistol...", she murmured.

That was most likely the name of the gun, but Minoru didn't know why she was making such a troubled expression about it. He picked up Olivier's sword, which was on the ground nearby, and turned around to see that its owner had just walked over to him.

Holding out the sword's handle, he lowered his head.

"Thank you, Divider. If you hadn't thrown that sword, we wouldn't have been able to drive him away."

"You too, Isolator. You're a good tank."

Olivier grinned as he took the sword, putting it away in the guitar case. But then his expression sobered, and he looked off in the direction where the man in the trench coat had fled. Shaking his head slowly, he grumbled to himself...

"Damn it. I only just got out of the hospital, too... Sorry, but I need you to handle the rest."

“Huh...?”

Confused, Minoru looked at Olivier more carefully.

For some reason, he was clutching his side with his right hand. And then Minoru saw that there was blood trickling from between his fingers.

“O...Oli-V!”

Crying out in shock, Minoru reached out to Olivier. But he was too late. The Divider slumped over and fell face-first on the ground.

One hour later, January 7, 7:30 p.m.

A drugstore shopping bag hung from Minoru's right hand as he walked quickly along the sidewalk.

Heading to the shopping district west of Inokashira Street, he found a fair number of passersby, though not as many as in front of Harajuku Station. This area was apparently called Kamiyama Street, but the banners hanging from the iron streetlights read OKU-SHIBU in bold gothic letters; it took Minoru a moment to realize that it must be short for "Heart of Shibuya."

Within a few minutes, he reached the center of the shopping street and turned left onto Inokashira Street. His destination was a business hotel across from the enormous NHK broadcast center. Minoru entered the lobby, strode past the front desk, and took the elevator to the sixth floor. Once he made sure there was no one else in the hallway, he pushed his key card into the door of the twin room. The lock clicked open, so he retrieved the key and hurried inside.

Once the door closed behind him and locked automatically, he heaved a sigh of relief. But there was certainly no time to relax just yet.

Minoru washed his hands thoroughly in the restroom, then went down the short hallway into the bedroom. Fairly large if a little narrowly shaped, the room contained a sofa and two single beds. A lone woman was resting in one of them.

"...I'm back."

As Minoru walked over, the woman whispered "*Merci*" without getting up. She slid her right hand out from under the blanket, placing her small pistol on the sideboard.

Every woman I've met up with today has been carrying a pistol, Minoru thought as he set out his purchases from the drugstore on the table next to the sofa: disinfectant, analgesic, extra-large hydrocolloid dressing, antibiotic ointment, bandages, scissors, tweezers, athletic tape, and alcohol wipes, plus about four thousand yen in change.

"I think I got everything you asked for..."

"Thank you."

Thanking him in Japanese this time, the woman—specifically, the Ruby Eye Liquidizer—put her feet on the floor and got out of bed. She staggered for a moment, but she held up a hand to stop Minoru from

standing and walked to the sofa on her own. Sitting down heavily, she closed her eyes for a moment. "All right, let's do this."

"...Okay, whenever you're ready."

At Minoru's confirmation, Liquidizer removed the towel that was wrapped tightly around her left shoulder. Her ivory knit sweater was stained dark red from the shoulder to the elbow. Grimacing, Liquidizer leaned forward and looked up at Minoru.

"Pull the sweater off."

"Wh-what?"

"Quickly. I would prefer to cut it off, but that would take too long with those scissors."

"But..."

I can't do that, Minoru wanted to declare, but her wound was still bleeding as he hesitated. Reminding himself that this was an emergency situation, Minoru took hold of the hem of the sweater on Liquidizer's back. Pulling carefully, he first lifted it over her head, then moved down and began freeing each arm.

Luckily, for Minoru at least, she was wearing a simple camisole underneath the sweater, so he didn't have to do the rest with his eyes closed. The bigger problem was the gunshot wound in her left shoulder.

The man's weapon, which Suu had called a SOCOM pistol, seemed to be a bigger caliber than the ones the SFD used, so the wound was awful to behold. There was a hole more than one centimeter in diameter marring her pure-white skin, with blood still gushing out of it.

Liquidizer, too, winced when she saw her own wound, but she quickly smoothed over her expression.

"The Isodine, please."

"Right."

Minoru took the cap off the disinfectant and handed it to Liquidizer, who poured it over her wound without hesitation. As the distinctive smell filled the air, she let out a muffled groan of pain.

"Tweezers."

"Right."

He pulled the tweezers out of the packaging and held them up, and Liquidizer put more disinfectant on them. After a moment, she took the tweezers and brought them close to the wound on her shoulder. But her hands were shaking, probably from the pain, so she couldn't hold them steady.

"...This isn't working. You do it, boy."

"Huh? I...I can't!" This time, Minoru voiced his objection aloud, shaking his head rapidly. "I've never, ever extracted a bullet out of a wound before..."

“I haven’t, either, obviously. Don’t worry—it’s not near any big veins. And we have no anesthesia, so all you have to do is grab it and pull it out.”

“B...but...”

“Please? I’ll buy you a present later.”

“I’m not a kid, you know...”

With that weak retort, Minoru took a deep breath, steeling himself. There was no one here but Liquidizer and Minoru. If she couldn’t do it, then he was going to have to.

Liquidizer handed him the tweezers, then leaned against the back of the sofa. Minoru leaned over her and stared at the wound. *It’s too dark*, he thought, but then the visibility instantly improved. Perhaps his Third Eye had gone into night-vision mode.

The lead-colored clump was visible surprisingly close to the surface. The bullet must have stopped when it hit the large tubercle of her humerus. *I guess this won’t be too bad*, he thought for a moment, but then he remembered that Liquidizer would feel every bit of it.

“Shouldn’t you at least take a painkiller first...?”

“I’d have to drink a ridiculous amount of that over-the-counter stuff for it to help at all, and then I won’t be fit for battle for a while yet. I’ll take a bit later, but I’m fine for now. Just get on with it.”

“...All right.”

If he kept fighting, Minoru might someday need to have someone do this same thing for him. Reminding himself of that, he strengthened his resolve as best he could and plunged the tips of the tweezers into the wound. He was trying to avoid touching her flesh, but that turned out to be impossible. Liquidizer groaned faintly, clutching Minoru’s shoulder with her right hand.

Holding his breath, Minoru moved the pincers in farther little by little until they touched something hard. He opened the tweezers slightly, moved them in a little deeper, and closed them around the bullet. He had to put some force into it to hold on to the bullet, but too much and the tweezers might slip, which would undoubtedly be incredibly painful. Restraining his strength to the bare minimum, Minoru gripped the tweezers and slowly, slowly began to pull the bullet out.

Though it was a distance of less than two centimeters, it felt ten times longer. Minoru forgot that he was holding his breath as he delicately moved his right hand. Then, finally, the clump of metal emerged from the wound.

“Whew...”

Letting the air out in gasps, Minoru slackened his grip. The bullet fell from the tweezers and hit the carpet with a dull *thud*.

Liquidizer sighed, too, letting go of Minoru’s shoulder. She sank

back onto the sofa and breathed deeply for a while, then cleaned the wound with more disinfectant.

“...The dressing, please.”

Minoru hurriedly opened the paper box and pulled out a large roll of hydrocolloid bandage before a thought occurred to him.

“Erm...shouldn’t the wound get stitched up first?”

“That would probably be best, yes, but I don’t have the skills to do that. I’m guessing you don’t, either, do you, boy?”

“D...definitely not.”

“Well, the bleeding has just about stopped, so I’m sure it’ll be fine. Be a dear and put that dressing on it, would you?”

“...All right.”

Minoru began affixing the plaster dressing to the wound, closing it up from either side. Then he carefully wrapped athletic tape around it, completing the emergency first aid. But still...

“Um...you should probably still go to the hospital, I think.”

Liquidizer smiled mirthlessly. “Listen, boy. I’m sure any old doctor would fix up this bullet wound for me, but they’d call the police, too. We Ruby Eyes don’t have any official backup, so we have no choice but to deal with wounds like this on our own.”

It was only then that Minoru remembered that the woman in front of him was a sworn enemy of Jet Eyes like himself. But for some reason, the concern in his chest didn’t go away.

“But...if you don’t get it treated properly, it might leave a scar and all that...”

“Goodness, are you actually worried about me?”

“Well...yes, I am. You only got shot because I couldn’t guard you in time.”

Minoru looked away and heard a faint chuckle in response.

“You have an odd sense of responsibility about things like that, hmm? No need to worry. It’ll probably leave a little scar but hardly any worse than one from a BCG vaccine or something along those lines.”

With that, Liquidizer opened the box of painkillers herself. Looking up, her eyes wandered to the refrigerator in the corner of the room.

“Would you mind getting me a beer?”

“Ah, sure...” Minoru started to get up, then stopped and shook his head. “N-no, you shouldn’t be drinking when you’ve been wounded! Just have some mineral water, please!”

“All right, all right. Water is fine.”

Stifling a sigh, Minoru retrieved a bottle of water from the small fridge, removed the cap, and handed it to Liquidizer. While she took the medicine with it, Minoru picked up the bullet from the floor.

Partly crushed, it was about the size of a black soybean and surprisingly heavy.

“...I’m amazed a bullet this big stopped at the bone,” he murmured.

Liquidizer was similarly serious as she replied, “Most .45 ACP ammunition is subsonic, and my coat has a bulletproof lining, but you’re right—that normally would’ve shattered the bone. Look closer—are there rifle marks on the bullet, or no?”

“Erm...”

Minoru squinted at the bullet.

He was a complete beginner when it came to guns, but he did sometimes read mystery and detective novels, so he was familiar with the existence of rifle marks in theory. Normally, the barrel of a gun was carved with a helix shape, imparting spin to the bullet as it traveled along, which raised its speed and power. This leaves spiral traces around the bullet, which are called rifle marks. There were no modern pistols that wouldn’t leave rifle marks—at least, there shouldn’t be.

But the bullet in Minoru’s palm had no such marks on it.

“Ah...it doesn’t...”

“I knew it. They must have been targeting me, so they brought a gun without rifling.”

“D-does that even exist? Refractor said his gun was called a SOCOM pistol...”

“That’s just the popular name for a gun called the H&K MK 23. It’s referred to that way because SOCOM—the United States Special Operations Command—uses them as their standard weapon. They have rifling, of course. But with a lathe or a milling machine, it’s actually quite easy to make a gun barrel from scratch. Especially if you don’t need to add rifling.”

“From scratch...? But why would a gun with no rifling be effective against...?”

Then it dawned on him. Minoru hadn’t seen it himself, but Yumiko said that in the battle in Minami-Aoyama, Liquidizer liquefied all her bullets, sending them scattering in a spiral pattern. When a bullet rotating at high speed because of rifling was liquefied, it would be scattered by the centrifugal force.

But this time, the bullet aimed at Liquidizer wasn’t rotating. So even if it was liquefied, it would just be melted into hot lead and keep moving forward.

As if to confirm Minoru’s theory, Liquidizer opened the palm of her right hand and showed it to him. Her pale skin was covered in blisters and burns. No wonder she couldn’t control the tweezers before.

Lowering her hand, she muttered angrily, "I managed to liquefy the first two shots, but the melted bullets just hit my hand. The pain and heat made me go *Ouch!* and then I lost my focus, which is why I wasn't able to melt the third one."

The way she said "Ouch!" was so funny that Minoru's lips quivered for a moment, but he quickly straightened out his expression. "...We should probably treat your hand, too."

"That's why I had you buy the ointment and the bandages."

Liquidizer looked from the burns on her right hand to the ointment on the table and back, then shrugged with her right shoulder.

"Sorry, but could you put that on for me, too?"

"Huh? Oh, um, sure..."

It certainly would be difficult for her to do it herself in this state. Her left shoulder was wrapped in the athletic tape, but the slightest movement would probably cause searing pain.

Telling himself that this was nothing compared to removing the bullet, Minoru placed it on the table, then took out one of the alcohol wipes. He wiped his own hands first, then used a new one to carefully clean Liquidizer's right hand. Opening the box of ointment, he squeezed a small amount from the tube onto his fingertip and started gently spreading it over her injured palm.

This very hand held one of the most dangerous powers of all known Third Eye hosts. It hadn't worked on Stinger, and the man in the trench coat had landed a hit on her, too, but that didn't change the fact that this was a weapon to be feared.

But secretly, Minoru was surprised to find that Liquidizer's hand was far smaller and daintier than he'd expected. A girl's hand, just like Yumiko or Tomomi. It seemed far better suited to holding a fountain pen or a teacup than a gun or a knife, but right now it was covered in burns and bruises, as well as tiny cuts that were likely from the battle with Stinger.

Why...? Minoru found himself wondering.

Why did Liquidizer have to keep fighting like this, being injured so much in the process? Because she was a Ruby Eye? But she'd said herself that Ruby and Jet Eyes alike were all being "manipulated by that tiny little sphere." If she knew that, though, then why did she choose to act as an enemy of humanity?

"...That's plenty."

Liquidizer's voice brought Minoru back to his senses with a start. Realizing he'd rubbed on more ointment than necessary, he quickly withdrew his hand.

"I, um... I'll do the bandages now."

"Please."

Unable to look Liquidizer in the face, Minoru kept his head down as he pulled out the bandages and carefully wrapped them around her hand. Once that was done, he realized he should've cut some athletic tape in advance.

"Um, I'm sorry. I'm sure your hand hurts, but would you mind holding the end of the bandage in place for a second?"

"Oh, there's no need."

Liquidizer moved her left hand, touching a fingertip to the edge of the bandage. Immediately, the end stuck in place, as if it had been stuck there with quick-drying glue. When he smelled the faint scent of a Ruby Eye ability, Minoru finally realized she'd liquefied it.

"...That's convenient."

"It certainly is now, but it took a considerable amount of practice to be able to selectively liquefy something so thin."

Liquidizer used her bandaged right hand to take a drink of the mineral water. Then she handed the bottle to Minoru, who put on the cap.

Now the first aid treatment was definitely complete. As Minoru cleaned up the supplies on the glass tabletop, he heard a soft murmur.

"I'm lucky you were here, boy. Thank you."

Startled, he looked up and found that the Ruby Eye was gazing at the window, the curtains of which were closed. As always, her makeup made it difficult to guess how old she was, but looking at her exhausted face from the side like this made her seem almost close to his own age.

"I...it's fine. This is all just part of the deal."

When Minoru managed to respond thus, Liquidizer looked at him with a faint smile.

"...Of course." She stood up laboriously and moved to the closest bed, where she flopped down and closed her eyes. "I'm going to rest for a bit, if you don't mind. Wake me by ten, please."

"...All right."

Minoru looked at the clock on the wall. It was 8:15.

Standing up, he turned off the main light, then crossed the room and sat on the sofa. He'd told Norie that he was going to be late due to a study session with the volunteer organization, but most likely he wouldn't be going home tonight at all. In a little while, he would have to send a message that he would be staying at a friend's house for the night.

Staying over at a friend's house on a weeknight was less than ideal behavior for a high school student. Each time he had an SFD mission, he felt like he was slowly breaking down the trust he had built up over the years. Norie would surely start to find his behavior strange sooner or later—in fact, it was entirely possible she did already. The

excuse of the volunteer group was only a temporary measure, and soon he would need to find a real solution.

Of course, the SFD had already offered him a more practical solution. He could transfer from Yoshiki High to Kousai Metropolitan High, a city school with dormitories—the same school Yumiko and Olivier already attended. Kousai was under the control of the 3E Committee, so the pair was registered as boarders but actually lived at SFD Headquarters. If Minoru did the same, he could participate in late-night missions without a problem and reduce the chances of Norie getting caught up in a Ruby Eye attack.

But emotionally, Minoru didn't want to move away from Yoshiki High, or from Norie. It wasn't that he hated change; rather, he suspected he actually *liked* his current life. Like the moment when the New Urban Center buildings first came into view on the way to school in the morning, or the cool air when he met up with Tomomi to run on the bank of the Arakawa River. Making dinner with Norie, chatting as they ate, cleaning up afterward, and watching a movie or a TV drama together—how dreary would his life be without those things?

He doubted he could go on lying each time he had a new mission. But he was hoping to keep it up just a little longer...until the end of third semester, at the very least.

As these thoughts ran through his mind, Minoru used his phone to start typing a message to Norie. Then, abruptly, something vibrated in his breast pocket. It was an unfamiliar number calling the phone Liquidizer had given him. Quickly glancing at the bed, he saw that she was sound asleep, lying primly on her back. Turning away, he pressed the answer icon and covered his mouth with his hand.

“...Hello?”

“Status?”

It was Yumiko's voice. She must have acquired a new phone, too, to avoid being tapped by the 3E Committee. Minoru answered her brusque question as best he could in a near-whisper.

“Liquidizer's wounds have been treated. There doesn't seem to be any bone or nerve damage.”

“I see. Good work. I can't believe we're actually helping her recover...”

I actually took the bullet out myself, Minoru thought, but he kept that to himself. “We have to cooperate with her until we can rescue Stargazer,” he answered instead. “But how are Divider and Refractor?”

“Komura just has a light contusion, so her brain is fine. Oli-V is doing well enough, too. The bullet must have been fairly low speed, so although it pierced his protective undershirt and his abdominal muscle, it just barely stopped before reaching the stomach wall. He'll need to go back to NCAM for a while, though, so he won't be able to help with tonight's mission.”

“Oh...I see. So who's going to be guarding the car?”

"DD still, and I'll be Oli-V's replacement."

"You, Y—Accelerator...?"

Minoru's mind raced.

Tonight, they were to enact a mission that would betray the SFD...or rather, the 3E Committee. Once the car left the hospital, Liquidizer would stop it in a secluded area, and they would spirit away Trancer from the trunk of the car, put him in a different vehicle, and escape as fast as they could. It was a simple, bare-bones plan, but since the only guards were supposed to be DD as the detector and Olivier as the attacker, it shouldn't have been too difficult. DD didn't know anything, but Olivier was on their side, so he could simply pretend to attack them and get one of his swords melted, and no one would suspect a thing.

But if the attacker was Yumiko, that changed things. Because even without her bike, she could move faster than a car on her own two feet. They would have to come up with a reason that she'd be unable to chase Liquidizer's car, or else lose sight of it somehow.

"...Now what?"

Minoru asked an equally short question, and Yumiko huffed in response.

"I hate to say it, but I'll probably have to let her melt a shoe or two, at least. I'll come up with something. But the departure time hasn't changed from one a.m. I'll contact you again before then."

She hung up without waiting for an answer.

Returning the phone back to his pocket, he went back to writing the message to Norie, but he couldn't focus. Nonetheless, he forced himself to finish and send it: "Looks like the study session'll run late, so I'm staying at Saito's tonight. I'll be back tomorrow right after school." Before long, the response came from Norie: "Okay. Don't forget to thank his parents. Be good!"

Guilt squeezed painfully at his chest as he held the phone and bowed his head deeply. *I'm sorry for lying. It's to help my friend and his sister*, he thought, suppressing the pain as best he could.

How did Yumiko and Olivier come to terms with the fact that they had to keep lying to their families? *I'll have to ask them sometime*, he thought as he put the smartphone away in his pants pocket, then glanced at the bed again.

Liquidizer didn't look like she would wake up anytime soon. In the faint glow of the night-light, her face appeared surprisingly young.

It was a little surprising that the most terrifying and strongest Ruby Eye would sleep so vulnerably like this, but he couldn't blame her. She'd been mortally wounded in the fight against Stinger on January 3 but rested only one day before staking out the Saitama New Urban Center station to find Minoru. She'd finally contacted him on

the night of the sixth, only to be attacked by the mysterious man in the trench coat the very next day, sustaining serious wounds again.

Third Eye holder or not, she must be reaching her limit, both physically and mentally. Yet, she was only going to rest for less than two hours before heading back out into battle.

In theory...

If Minoru took the pistol that was still on the sideboard and shot Liquidizer in the head, he could probably kill her easily. Sharp as she was, she must have considered that possibility. But even with that awareness, she had chosen to rest, to raise their chances of successfully stealing Trancer back even a little. It wasn't that she trusted Minoru or was underestimating him. Most likely, she had simply calculated the risks and accepted them.

...She must have a family, too, Minoru thought suddenly.

Until four months ago, when the red Third Eye entered her body, she was surely living an ordinary life as an ordinary girl. But whether that life had been stolen from her or she'd chosen to cast it aside, she had lost it now. All because of a tiny parasite that infected its host with the irresistible urge to kill.

Stop sympathizing with her, he reminded himself firmly, looking away from Liquidizer's sleeping face.

Ruby Eyes weren't under constant brain control. She could have surrendered to the SFD and willingly had the removal operation. But Liquidizer didn't do that—nor did Biter, nor Igniter, nor Trancer. All of them made the choice, to be enemies of humanity of their own free will, even if indirectly.

Once Liquidizer had Trancer and Olivier rescued Claire, this temporary truce would be over. Liquidizer and the SFD would go back to being enemies, and they would probably try to kill one another again when next they met. Minoru had to be sure he didn't forget that.



Minoru picked up the water bottle on the table and took a drink from it, then pulled out his vocabulary flash cards from his bag. It would probably be best for him to get some sleep, too, but if he trusted Liquidizer and gave her the chance to kill him, he thought, that would be insulting to both of them.

Whatever the man at the front desk thought of a businesswoman and a high school boy staying just four hours in a twin room at a business hotel, his face made no indication of it as they checked out late at night. Once they stepped onto the sidewalk outside the hotel, Minoru thanked Liquidizer, who had paid for the room with a credit card.

“Sorry you wound up having to pay... Thank you.”

“It’s perfectly standard for the adult to pay in a situation like this,” Liquidizer responded coolly, then glanced at her injured shoulder. “Besides, we got the room in order to treat my wounds in the first place.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Well, the pain’s gotten better, at least somewhat. I should be able to drive just fine.”

“Sorry. I hate to ask, but I can’t drive, so...”

“Well, of course not.”

A brief smile drifted across Liquidizer’s face, to which the color was starting to return. She had used her ability to close up the hole the bullet had made in her crimson down coat, too, so you would never imagine, looking at her, that she’d been shot just a few hours ago. It had certainly seemed difficult when she put her knit sweater back on, though, the dried blood making the left sleeve stiff.

In any case, however, she probably wouldn’t be able to use her left hand in battle.

Since they had a (wo)man on the inside for this assault, there would theoretically be no fighting involved, but there were some unknown factors too important to ignore. The man in the trench coat who’d attacked them in Yoyogi Park—the Ruby Eye Liquidizer had called “Lubricator”—had evidently shown up to attack Liquidizer, not Minoru and the other SFD members. In other words, he had some way of tracking her. They had to figure out what it was before the mission started.

“Um...before we go, could we talk for a minute?”

“I suppose so, but...I’d rather not stand around chatting out here. Let’s do it in the car.”

“...All right.”

Minoru nodded, and Liquidizer led him to an underground parking lot south of the NHK broadcasting center. According to the sign out front, it was an enormous facility that could accommodate up

to 650 cars; even at this time of night, it was still considerably full.

As they walked, Minoru breathed in deeply through his nose. He was trying to check for the scent of a Ruby Eye ability, but—

“If you’re trying to sniff out a Ruby Eye surprise attack, don’t bother. The detection radius for his ability is incredibly small.”

“Detection radius” referred to the distance from which a Third Eye holder’s ability was noticeable by smell. The range was based on the size of the matter alteration created by the ability: Powers like Yumiko’s acceleration and Olivier’s division could be detected in a radius of about twenty-five meters, Minoru’s defensive shell had a radius of ten meters, Suu’s refraction was about half a meter, and abilities like the Professor’s speculation and DD’s search were next to zero.

That being said, the slippery vinyl the trench coat-clad man created had been at least twenty meters around. So the detection radius for it should be at least that large, maybe even over thirty meters, or so Minoru thought.

Guessing at Minoru’s thoughts from his puzzled expression, Liquidizer continued. “I’ll explain all that, too. Here’s my car.”

She produced a smart key from her tote bag and pressed a button, and the white hatchback in front of them to their right responded with a sharp beep. Minoru was pretty sure it was a Suzuki Swift—no, a step higher than that, the Swift Sport.

Minoru had never been interested in cars, but when he first joined the SFD, he started memorizing models because Yumiko insisted that it was vital knowledge for the job. She claimed it was to help track Ruby Eyes who escaped in cars, but it had yet to come in handy much so far. If Liquidizer ditched Minoru here and fled, then he might actually get to use that knowledge for the first time, but that situation was highly unlikely.

“You can put your bag in the back seat.”

Minoru obeyed, then opened the passenger-side door. When he slid into one of the seats, which had a sporty design like the ones in the Alfa Romeo Giulietta Yumiko drove, the strangeness of the situation struck him in a way that hadn’t really sunk in at the hotel, and he stared blankly at the dashboard.

The reasons Minoru was alone with Liquidizer were twofold: in order to help treat her wound and because the official story was that neither of them had been at Yoyogi Park. The official report to the SFD was that Yumiko, Olivier, and Suu had been walking around the park when they were attacked by an unknown Ruby Eye, and though they repelled the enemy, Olivier was shot—a simple-enough cover story.

DD aside, Minoru wasn’t sure if they’d be able to fool Professor

Riri Isa and her superhuman mind, but it was too late to stop now. If Olivier hadn't thrown his sword, Suu would probably be dead, and Olivier had asked him to "handle the rest."

As Minoru tried to bring his agitated thoughts back to reality, Liquidizer spoke abruptly, looking into the rearview mirror.

"Lubricator is an executive in the Syndicate. The same rank as me."

"The same rank...," Minoru blurted out. "But I don't even know how high-ranking you are."

"Frankly, neither do I. But if you'll accept a guess, I suppose I can tell you. The heads of the Syndicate are known as Organizers. I've only met one, but I believe there are two others. The three of them decide the Syndicate's objectives and actions in their meetings."

"Organizers...? That sounds very similar to a Third Eye code name," Minoru commented.

Liquidizer smirked a little. "That's not our fault. We never used code names to begin with, but the SFD started calling us all those strange nicknames, and somewhere along the way, they just stuck on our side, too."

"I don't know if that's the SFD's fault, either..."

"Well, it doesn't matter much now... Anyway, below the Organizers is a single role called the Liaison, who's in charge of contacting and managing everyone. And I'm one step below that, a Mentor...so you could say I'm the third step down from the top. And there's another rank on the same level as Mentors, called Observers. Lubricator is one of those."

A mentor usually guided someone under their wing, so it was probably safe to assume that Liquidizer was Trancer's Mentor. This made sense to Minoru, but he couldn't help raising a new question in its stead.

"Thank you for the explanation, but...should you really be telling me all this? I can't just give you SFD information in return, you know."

"I wasn't expecting anything of the sort." Liquidizer waved her right hand dismissively, then turned serious. "The role of an Observer is to keep watch on the Ruby Eyes who belong to the Syndicate, ensuring that they're doing their job correctly. Usually, members with surveillance-related abilities are chosen for the role, but Lubricator is an exception...because he serves as both observer and executioner."

"E...executioner?!"

"Are you really that surprised? He did shoot at me out of nowhere earlier. I doubt that it was his own judgment call, though... More likely than not, the Organizers decided I should be eliminated."

Minoru stared at Liquidizer's calm face in profile.

“Eliminated? Is that because they found out you contacted us...?”

“Hrmm...” Liquidizer pressed her finger to her temple in thought. “That would make sense, but I first contacted you last night, so that seems a little soon to come after my head. Both back then and today, I spent a ridiculous amount of time and energy making sure I wasn’t followed... Besides, I have the authority to take action on my own.”

“In other words...?”

“In other words, they should have no easy way of knowing for sure whether my contacting you is part of a long con or whether I’ve actually betrayed the Syndicate. At the very least, they would interrogate me before issuing the order for my elimination, one should think.”

“What...?”

As soon as he heard the phrase *long con*, Minoru automatically shifted away from her toward the door. Liquidizer sighed, rolled her eyes, and pointed at her left shoulder.

“If it really was a long con, I obviously would’ve called it off as soon as I got injured like this.”

“I... I wasn’t doubting you or anything. Anyway, erm...the real problem now is, how did Lubricator know where to find you? We managed to drive him away at Yoyogi Park, but judging by how quickly he was running, I don’t think he took much serious damage... so he might try to attack us again.”

“Might? Oh, I’d say that’s a definite.”

Liquidizer put her hands on the leather steering wheel. She winced a little, probably from pain in her shoulder, but her expression quickly returned to normal.

“Lubricator’s power, as the code name implies, is to create a thin film that can reduce the coefficient of friction to almost zero on any given surface. As far as I know, the film can be up to at least eighteen meters in size...and he can move it around at will, too. Since there’s no friction, it can easily be slipped between someone’s feet and the floor. And once you’re caught in the film, you’re rendered functionally immobile.”

Having already experienced the unbelievable slipperiness of Lubricator’s film for himself, Minoru understood the explanation with his senses as much as his mind. He remembered all too well the feeling of helplessness no matter how much he struggled, like floating in space.

The only way to escape from that film would be to either use a grappling gun like in an action movie—if such a thing even existed—or unleash high-pressure gas from a cylinder on one’s back, or... Then something finally occurred to him.

“No...wait a minute. If the friction is zero, couldn’t two people

push their feet together and launch each other out of the film that way?"

Liquidizer tapped the fingers of her right hand lightly on the steering wheel, as if applauding Minoru's off-the-cuff idea.

"You catch on pretty quickly, boy. Yes, if there are two or more people together on the frictionless film, then that would work... Really, all you would need is for one person to push the other. But remember that Lubricator can manipulate the film at will. You might think you've escaped, but you'll just end up falling again as soon as you try to stand up."

"I see..."

Imagining the situation in his mind's eye, he had to admit it would probably go that way. But he couldn't just give up immediately, so he continued to rack his brain.

"Erm...well, the film is slippery on the surface, right? So he couldn't stick it to something?"

"Probably not. It can probably slide onto the surface of something or wrap around it, but I don't think it could be stuck there."

"Then what about sucking it up with a handheld vacuum cleaner? Of course, it'd probably come down to whether the vacuum cleaner's suction is stronger than Lubricator's manipulation, but..."

On hearing this second idea, Liquidizer blinked for a moment, then burst out laughing. She quickly covered her mouth with her hand, but the laughter continued to spill through for a while.

"Ha-ha-ha... Whew... A vacuum cleaner, eh? I certainly never thought of that. But a vacuum's suction relies on the friction in the air, doesn't it? If the coefficient of friction on the target is zero, would it still be able to suck it up?"

"Um, well...the friction in the air is basically collisions between gas molecules, right...?"

Why are we having a physics lesson right now? Minoru thought, but he forced himself to continue. "At a macroscopic level, friction is produced when two uneven surfaces catch on each other, but at a microscopic level—that is, a molecular level—it's caused by intermolecular forces, which I'm sure you know quite well. Since those are generally electrostatic interactions, they have nothing to do with the shape of the physical surfaces. As long as Lubricator's film is made of some kind of physical substance, it should be affected by air molecule collisions. And my intuition tells me that an ultrathin film shouldn't be able to ignore the pull of a vacuum cleaner's suction."

It was nothing short of miraculous that Minoru managed to get through the whole explanation without stumbling on his words, but Liquidizer didn't seem that impressed. Instead, she spoke a single word:

“Carbon.”

“Erm...what about it?”

“That’s what Lubricator’s frictionless film is made of. I took a risk and looked into it once a while ago. The film is composed of pure carbon. That’s probably why its detection range is so remarkably small, too.”

“Carbon...?” Minoru tilted his head at the unexpected revelation. “Um...carbon is just C, right? I definitely don’t think of it as being slippery. If anything, isn’t it supposed to be coarse...?”

That was when it hit him: After Lubricator fled and the film disappeared, there was a grainy powder left behind. He looked at his left hand automatically, but he’d cleaned it extremely thoroughly before and after treating Liquidizer, so of course there was no residue left.

“I thought so, too, but there’s no doubt about it. I don’t know how a carbon film can be so damn slippery, but I doubt we could figure out any more without Lubricator’s own help.”

As Liquidizer sighed, Minoru couldn’t help thinking, *If only we could ask Professor Riri...* With the Speculator’s ability to instantly solve any problem based on only the most basic information, she could almost certainly reveal the secrets of the frictionless film.

But they couldn’t drag the Professor into this Trancer recovery mission. Until they got Olivier’s sister back—or until they knew the exact location of the Syndicate base, at the very least—Minoru and company had no choice but to fight without their commander.

“...You *will* tell us where Stargazer is once we get Trancer back, right?”

Despite the sudden change of subject, Liquidizer’s face didn’t twitch. She nodded, as if she’d been expecting the question. “Of course. That was the deal, no?”

“Then...I’ll handle Lubricator somehow. If he attacks us again, please just focus on recovering Trancer.”

“Somehow? And how might that be, boy?”

“Lubricator’s film just stops you from moving. It’s not an attack. So if his only weapon is a gun, I can block his bullets with my protective shell. I should be able to slow him down, at the very least.”

“.....”

This time, the silence continued for a while.

Finally, Liquidizer moved her hand from the steering wheel to the shift knob. She switched the gear from reverse to neutral, pushed down on the pedal, and pressed the start button. The engine started with an impressive sound for a Japanese car, and the meters lit up. The time on the navigation screen read 11:00 p.m. Two hours remained until the car left NCAM with Trancer.

“...Isn’t it a little early?” Minoru asked.

Liquidizer eased off the side brake and gave an unexpected response. “We ought to refuel first.”

“What...the car?”

“No, you and I. The food I bought before our meetup is somewhere in the trash in the park now.”

She shifted into first gear, and the Swift smoothly took off into the night.

Liquidizer first stopped at a large clothing store, where she waffled for a while before settling on a high-neck sweater, replacing her bloodstained clothes.

Next, she brought Minoru to an *okonomiyaki* restaurant on a back street of the Jingu-mae district of Shibuya. The narrow, trendy street was lined with galleries, apparel shops, cafés, and more, so Minoru was nervous that the *okonomiyaki* place would be similarly upscale, but it turned out to be old-fashioned and relaxing inside. The extensive menu ranged from classic *okonomiyaki* flavors, like pork and mixed veggie, to interesting variations, like avocado tomato and shrimp with cheese. Although the prices, of course, were a reminder that they were still in the neighborhood of Harajuku.

As soon as he smelled the rich scent of sauce that filled the restaurant, Minoru realized that he was out of fuel, too; he wound up eating two kinds of *okonomiyaki*, a seafood *teppanyaki*, and even a Caesar salad. Liquidizer turned out to have strong opinions about how to cook *okonomiyaki*, and Minoru found that following her instructions did make the batter cook into an extra-fluffy, delicious pancake.

Liquidizer paid for the food as well. As they walked back to the coin-parking area, there was some small part of Minoru that couldn’t help thinking that if his older sister Wakaba were alive, perhaps they would’ve gone out to eat together like this, too...

But just ten minutes later, that sentimental mood would be completely erased.

“Wait...the police?”

As soon as they got back to the car, Minoru received a call from Yumiko.

“Wasn’t the driver supposed to be Searcher?!”

“I thought so, too, but they told us to focus on guarding the car. This is becoming quite the headache.”

“I see... Yeah.” Minoru tried to come up with a countermeasure, but nothing came to mind.

According to Yumiko, they had suddenly been informed that the driver and navigator for the car leaving NCAM would be police

officers working for the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department Public Security Bureau, under the jurisdiction of the 3E Incident Countermeasure Committee. Normally, the police were unsung heroes to the SFD who put up blockades around Ruby Eye battle scenes, but today they were an unwelcome complication for Minoru and the group. If they explained things to DD later, he would probably understand, but not so much with the police.

"We're still leaving at one a.m. We have forty-five minutes, so I'll try to figure out if we can do anything about it on our end. I'll call again."

"All right..."

Even after the call ended, Minoru kept staring at the screen of his smartphone. But he couldn't just sit in silence forever. He turned toward the gaze he felt boring into his right cheek.

"...There are going to be two public-safety officers in the car with Trancer."

"I see."

Liquidizer's response was brief, but Minoru thought he saw a faint red glow in her eyes for just a moment. Instinctively, he shook his head. "No."

"No what?"

"You can't kill them. There has to be a better way..."

A creaking sound interrupted his words. Liquidizer was gripping the steering wheel so hard that her knuckles were turning white.

"If there is, you had better think of it fast. Otherwise, we'll do things my way."

Her voice was colder than the January night air. Minoru bit his lip, focusing on how they could deal with the two police officers without hurting them or revealing that SFD members had been involved. But before he could think of any ideas, Liquidizer went on in a cool monotone.

"Let me remind you of something, boy. Trancer has killed at least ten people indiscriminately. You're the ones who agreed to help me free such a vicious criminal. What difference does it make if two more victims are killed in the process?"

"....."

Minoru had been intentionally putting that truth out of his mind all this time. As he clenched his teeth, he remembered a sharp voice in his ears.

Trancer here has killed more than ten innocent people. If I don't eliminate him while I have the chance, I might as well give up being a Jet Eye.

Yumiko had said that to Liquidizer when they faced off at the cold-storage unit in Ooi Futo just four days ago. At the time, Yumiko had her gun pointed at Trancer and was on the verge of pulling the

trigger. If Stinger hadn't interrupted, she almost certainly would have killed him.

Liquidizer had responded with a plea: *If you kill that child now, you'll just become another chess piece manipulated by your whims.*

At the time, Liquidizer seemed desperate to save Trancer. And she was just as desperate now. She was willing to betray the Syndicate to save him, even if it meant putting her own life in danger. From her perspective, the lives of two officers might mean little by comparison. But even so.

"Even so, I'm sure you're not saying that because you *want* to kill them. With your brains, I'm sure you could succeed without having to kill anyone."

Liquidizer turned her gaze forward. "You're telling *me* to come up with a way, then?"

Her voice was cold, but Minoru couldn't back down now.

"...I'll do whatever I can, too. In the worst-case scenario, it's even okay if they find out I'm betraying them, as long as it's only me. I'm sure they would just fire me from the SFD."

"I wouldn't be so sure. As I told Divider, I wouldn't be surprised if they suspected you of being brainwashed and removed your Third Eye."

"I don't mind. As long as it saves Stargazer...Divider's sister."

At that, Liquidizer loosened her grip on the steering wheel ever so slightly and let out a long sigh.

When she finally spoke again, a little bit of the ice had left her voice.

"The real problem is Searcher."

Minoru blinked, surprised by her sudden mention of DD's code name. "...What do you mean?"

"That baseball-loving boy has ridiculously good enemy-detection abilities. If he's in the car, a surprise ambush will be impossible."

"...Baseball? I don't think he's ever mentioned that to me."

"He has a shaved head and a baseball cap. I'd bet money on it... At any rate, as long as Searcher's in play, we have no choice but to use aggressive tactics. We'll have to assume we'll be detected and attack them head-on, stop the car, prevent it from moving, and seize Trancer. If their only defense was Accelerator, we could just pretend to fight and flee, but that won't work as long as the police are in the car, too. I'm sure they're fairly well equipped. It won't be easy for me to fend off their bullets, rescue Trancer, and get back to the car all on my own."

The baseball theory aside, Minoru couldn't deny the rest. DD would likely be armed, as would the two officers, and even Liquidizer probably couldn't melt bullets coming at her from three directions at

once.

On the other hand, the officers wouldn't be allowed to fire with other cars or pedestrians around. Maybe it would be best to take advantage of that, even if it essentially meant using ordinary citizens as a shield.

"...Um, what if you gave up on fleeing in a car and just melted the pavement and escaped underground like you did in Minami-Aoyama? If you could get into a subway line or something like that, I doubt even Searcher could chase you down easily."

Minoru finally had an idea, but Liquidizer immediately shook her head.

"That won't work on the road. If I hit an electric utility conduit and melted the high-voltage wire, I'd be electrocuted on the spot, and gas and water pipes are dangerous in their own right, too."

"Ah...right."

Power lines were being moved underground at a fever pitch in preparation for the Olympics later that year. And even if there were no electricity lines nearby, as Liquidizer said, she could easily hit a gas pipe or water pipe. That meant she couldn't use that escape method unless she researched in advance whether there was anything underground in that area.

"By the way...if we *were* able to do an ambush, what sort of method were you thinking?"

"It's simple. I'd set up a delayed liquefaction area somewhere on the car's route. Once the car hit that and was rendered immobile, I'd approach from the back, melt the lock on the trunk, and get Trancer out."

"I see..."

It was a simple plan, but all the more likely to succeed because of it. But DD's nose would probably sniff out Liquidizer's trap and change their route. He hadn't thought much about it before, but now that DD was an enemy—or temporarily against them, at least—Minoru realized just how useful and frightening his wide-range radar really was.

Nonetheless, they couldn't just attack head-on. In that situation, Liquidizer would surely aim to neutralize the officers in the driver and passenger seats first. This wasn't the kind of situation in which she could easily hold back and only melt their guns, and she probably had no intention of doing so anyway.

Olivier had said something before he got shot by Lubricator and collapsed: *I don't want anyone getting hurt over this*. And since he had entrusted the rest of the operation to Yumiko and company, they couldn't just give up. There had to be another way.

Minoru wished he had something to grab on to, to help fend off

the anxiety, but all that was in front of him was the cover of the glove box, so instead he twined his hands together as if in prayer. When he pressed down, he could feel his bones creak.

Was there some way to stop the car without using Liquidizer's ability, so that DD wouldn't detect it? Like putting a wire across the road or scattering some spikes... No, those weren't guaranteed, and they could cause a huge accident. So was the only way for Minoru to put himself in its path and stop it? If he crashed into the car head-on with his protective shell and slowed the car down gradually, they could at least avoid causing any harm to the passengers or people around them...

He was just about to voice this last-ditch measure when Liquidizer suddenly murmured, "There is one way we could set up an ambush without Searcher noticing...perhaps anyway."

"Huh?" Minoru turned to look at her. "Wh-what is it...?"

The Ruby Eye swiveled her head slowly, meeting Minoru's gaze directly.

"Well, whether it would work or not isn't up to me... It's up to you, Isolator."

The third call from Yumiko came just ten minutes before 1:00 a.m.

"I'm calling from the restroom, so we don't have long. We're leaving at the scheduled time in a black Alphard. Our destination is Camp Mishuku, a Self-Defense Force base. We'll be heading south on Gaien East Avenue, then west on Route 246, past Shibuya Station, then taking a left at the Mishuku intersection. No change to the personnel on board. Once you decide when to attack, let me know via text."

"R...right."

At that, Yumiko simply hung up.

Minoru was so shocked by the mention of the Self-Defense Force that he simply sat there holding the phone in silence for a moment, but he returned to his senses when he felt a piercing gaze on his right. Hurriedly, he relayed the information to Liquidizer, who looked equally grave.

"Camp Mishuku, you say?"

"Yes... Why, is there something special about it?"

"Quite a few things, but its main facilities are the Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics Agency's Electronic Systems Research Center and the Self-Defense Force's main hospital, I would say."

That made some sense to Minoru. "If there's a hospital, then maybe they're planning on transferring Trancer there? They've probably got better defenses than an ordinary hospital..."

"I don't know if it's quite such a passive reason, but...as long as we steal him back before they get there, it doesn't matter, I suppose." Liquidizer spoke in a strained voice as she pulled out her own smartphone, scrolling through a map application. "...Gaien East Avenue and Route 246 will both still have quite a bit of traffic at this time of night. If we're going to set a trap...it'll have to be here, on this street on the north side of Setagaya Park."

Minoru peered at the phone she held out and narrowed his eyes.

"What?! But that's right in front of the base!"

"It doesn't matter. Even if we were to run around shooting guns at their front gates, the soldiers at the base would need permission from the prime minister or the minister of defense before they could do a damn thing. More importantly..." Liquidizer put away the phone and looked at Minoru intently. "Can you do it?"

"...Yes."

He nodded, and Liquidizer silently started the engine. Leaving the

parking area, the Swift revved fiercely toward Setagaya Park.

The last train on the Yamanote line had just departed, so both Meiji Avenue and Route 246 were packed with taxis, but Liquidizer weaved around them expertly and got them through the five-kilometer journey in less than ten minutes.

When they arrived at the planned site of attack, they slowed down and searched for cameras. There was one at the parking lot on the south side of the road, so Liquidizer did a U-turn outside the camera's view, stopped the car, and confirmed that the three cars parked on the street nearby were empty before shooting out the camera with a silenced pistol.

Next, she produced black gloves and some kind of large sticker from the glove box.

"Put on the gloves, then stick this on the back."

Liquidizer handed Minoru the gloves and the sticker, which had one letter and four numbers printed on it in dark green. Its use was obvious. Obediently, Minoru put on the gloves, got out of the car, and affixed the sticker directly over the license plate.

I guess the Syndicate has their ways of dealing with things, he thought, when suddenly the smartphone in his inner pocket vibrated. Yumiko had sent him a text.

"@SBY 5 min," it read.

Minoru furrowed his brow for a moment before figuring it out. The car was currently passing Shibuya Station and would arrive at its destination in five minutes, he guessed. Yumiko was probably texting in secret next to DD, so he couldn't blame her for sending such a short message. Minoru responded with "Waiting at Setagaya Park, north side," then looked up at Liquidizer as she approached.

"They're five minutes away."

"*D'accord.*" Responding in French, Liquidizer glanced around quickly. "That car there should work."

She pointed at a silver minivan parked some twenty meters away from the Swift: a Nissan Serena. Though Minoru felt bad for the owner, its large size certainly made it an ideal hiding place.

Liquidizer walked up to the front of the Serena and slid her index finger into the gap between the hood and the front grille. Immediately, a minuscule hole opened in it without a sound. She moved her hand to the side and withdrew it within seconds.

She'd used her liquefaction ability to break the locking mechanism. It only took less than a second, so even DD shouldn't be able to pick up on it from several kilometers away. Liquidizer lifted the hood and had Minoru hold it in place while she used her ability to cut the red cable connecting to the battery. Even Minoru could figure

out that this must be to disable the car's security.

Closing the hood, she walked to the rear door on the sidewalk side. It was locked, of course, but Liquidizer pushed her right hand through the window and unlocked it from the inside. Opening the sliding door, she slipped inside. Minoru followed and closed the door behind him. Four minutes left.

The Serena's two rows of seats were quite a bit larger than the Mitsubishi Delica D5 used by the SFD. Sinking into one of the leather-covered seats, Liquidizer closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

Though she'd eaten well at the *ekonomiyaki* restaurant, her face still looked pale. That was only natural—she hadn't yet recovered from the fight with Stinger, and now she had been shot, pulled out the bullet in a hotel room, and slept for less than two hours.

"Is your shoulder..."

...all right? Minoru was about to ask. But Liquidizer held up her right hand to cut the question short, then opened her eyes and looked at Minoru.

"I'm fine. Let's get started."

"...Okay."

Minoru nodded and pressed his right hand to his chest. Feeling the presence of the black Third Eye that lived in his sternum, he spoke to the woman with the red Third Eye.

"Imagine that there's a small child inside me, a completely different person from myself."

"...A child?"

"That's right. A child who's shy and cowardly but also very curious. That child is frightened of you, since we've fought before. But at the same time, he wants to know more about you."

"...And this child controls your protective shell, boy?"

Minoru shook his head.

There were three minutes left. In less than a minute, DD would probably pick up on Liquidizer's scent.

"I'm the one who turns the switch on and off. But that child is the one who creates the shell. So it's not up to me who can enter the shell and who will be pushed out."

This was Minoru's current explanation for the mysterious phenomenon that sometimes allowed him to bring others into his shell.

It had accepted Suu Komura, even though they'd just met for the first time. But after that, when they tried to re-create it at SFD Headquarters, it stubbornly rejected Yumiko Azu. Minoru had assumed that it was based on the mental condition of both parties—whether they felt any animosity toward the other at the time. But thinking back to those experiments, Minoru had only felt a little timid

toward Yumiko, not hostile—and he'd felt the same way when it worked with Suu. He had succeeded in bringing Yumiko into his shell during the fight against Igniter, too, so there must not be any simple conditions that determined the outcome.

When Suu came to pick him up today—no, last night—she had said something about it, too. That when Minoru brought Suu into his shell at the hospital, someone else's hand seemed to enter her head and heal the hematoma inside it. Minoru had felt the same thing. If that hand belonged to the being that gave Minoru his mysterious protective-shell ability, then it was up to him, or her, whether Liquidizer would be allowed inside.

Suddenly, Liquidizer lifted her left hand. She placed it over Minoru's right hand, which was still pressed to his chest, and spoke in a voice that was quiet but clear.

"I promise you...I will never allow Trancer to kill again. So please give me a chance to save him."

Immediately, Minoru felt a sharp ache in his chest. He answered instinctively:

"But...what about you?"

"*I have never killed a single person up to this point*, I'll have you know."

Before Minoru could say anything else, Liquidizer pressed her upper body close to his. Pulling him to her with both arms, she whispered in his ear:

"Go ahead. Do it."



Minoru nodded, took a deep breath, and turned on the switch.

His body floated ever so slightly above the seat. All of the background noise vanished, and the glow from the streetlights tinted blue. But not everything disappeared: He still felt Liquidizer's warmth and heard her breath.

His protective shell had accepted a Ruby Eye woman, one of the most powerful sworn enemies of the Jet Eyes.

As the ever-present mysterious bass sound echoed distantly, there was a quiet voice next to Minoru's ear.

"So this is your power, boy..."

"No, not mine... It's someone else's power that protects me."

At that, some of the tension left Liquidizer's body. She rested her head on Minoru's left shoulder.

"I've always believed that Third Eyes were just parasitic creatures that control their hosts and force them to fight," she said. "So I thought I should try to use the Third Eyes and the situation they created to my own ends, too. But in this space...there's no anger, no hatred. There's only...only..."

Liquidizer fell silent. Minoru thought he should say something but couldn't find the words. Instead, he simply stated some practical information.

"...One minute left."

"Indeed."

He felt Liquidizer nod against his shoulder.

This was her plan to hide from DD's long-distance detection ability to ambush the car: going inside Minoru's protective shell. As long as she was in the shell, all signs of her presence would be completely blocked from the outside world, so that even Searcher wouldn't know she was there.

"Once I jump out, just follow the plan."

Her voice was professional again. Minoru nodded.

Thirty seconds later, through the front windshield, he saw the headlights of a car turning the corner. A black minivan. That intimidating front grille could only belong to a Toyota Alphard.

"They're here."

"Turn it off on three."

The Alphard was moving at about forty kilometers per hour as it approached. There were no other cars behind it. It was thirty meters away from the Serena they were hiding in...twenty meters...

"One, two, three."

As soon as Liquidizer's count ended, Minoru deactivated the protective shell.

Liquidizer jumped over to the street-side door with a speed that

belied her recent injuries. She pulled the handle immediately and leaped out onto the street.

The Alphard hit the brakes, a high-pitched screech filling the night air. It hadn't been going all that quickly, but it still wasn't easy for the large minivan to come to a halt. Just as it was about to strike the crouching Liquidizer, she dove to the right. Immediately, the Alphard pitched forward.

The front grille had sunk more than halfway into the road—caught in the asphalt that Liquidizer had liquefied. No, judging by how deep the car was sinking, it wasn't just the surface of the asphalt that she melted. The base layer of rubble beneath it, and even the ground below, had all been turned to liquid in an instant. And the radius of this was about two meters wide, three meters long.

Her power could only be described as incredible.

But just sinking the tires even halfway would have been enough to stop the car. Why had she gone so deep?

It dawned on Minoru only belatedly: The Alphard's front doors were sunk about halfway in, and the rear doors about a third of the way, into the black mire. Which meant the crew inside couldn't open the doors.

Crack! A heavy sound filled the air. The liquefied asphalt had solidified again.

Once he'd seen all this, Minoru opened the door on the sidewalk side and jumped out as well. Lowering his body, he dashed over to the Swift, which was about twenty meters away. Opening the rear hatch, he hopped into the back of the car. They'd lowered the back seats, so there was enough space for one more person along with Minoru.

Please let this end without anyone getting hurt! he hoped fervently as he looked out the back.

Liquidizer had just gone around to the rear of the van and was pressing her right hand against the Alphard's back door.

She melted the lock and opened the door, then forced her way inside and dragged out a large wheelchair. The person strapped into it by multiple belts, presumably Trancer, didn't even twitch. They must have knocked him out with some kind of drug.

Liquidizer lowered the wheelchair to the road, closed the back door, and lightly touched the space between the door and the fender with both hands. Most likely, she was liquefying the metal of the door to the car so that it wouldn't open. With that done, she grabbed the handles of the wheelchair and ran over to the Swift, where Minoru was waiting. Things were going well—almost too well.

But there was one problem. The low ceiling of the Swift wouldn't fit the wheelchair. They would have to remove all the straps and free Trancer.

Minoru thought he should jump down and help. But if he got out of the car, then one of the officers or DD might see his face. If it was just DD, Yumiko might be able to talk him down, but not so for the officers.

I should've brought a ski mask or something, he lamented, but it was too late now. All he could do was watch as Liquidizer sprinted over.

Just then, the windows of the Alphard's back door broke into pieces. A yellow light flashed in the darkness of the van, and the night air was filled with dry popping sounds. The police officers had started shooting at her.

Sparks flew on the asphalt, and bullets hit the Swift's bumper as well. It was probably difficult to shoot through the back door from the front seats, but they were only twenty meters away. At this rate, either transporter or payload would be hit. Minoru gritted his teeth.

But then Liquidizer let go of the handles of the wheelchair, whirled around, and spread both hands. The flying bullets hit her liquefaction field and scattered into silver droplets. At the same time, she shouted:

"Please get the straps off!"

It was an order—no, a plea—to Minoru. If he got out now, Liquidizer should be able to block him from view. Minoru half jumped, half rolled to the asphalt and ran up to the wheelchair.

Trancer, also known as Ryu Mikawa, was slumped over motionless in a gray straitjacket. He was unconscious, as Minoru had suspected. Tough-looking belts were affixed to the seat, back, and footrests of the chair, binding Trancer tightly.

Minoru quickly tried to unbind the straps on the left first, but the metal buckles were locked, so pulling at them didn't move them an inch. The straps themselves were nylon, but it would require a sharp knife to cut through them. While Liquidizer was holding off the bullets for now, if they took much longer, they would probably be swarmed by patrol cars...or maybe even an attack helicopter like the one the Self-Defense Force used on New Year's. They had to get away, and fast.

"...Nngh!"

As panic set his blood aflame, Minoru examined the wheelchair.

Then he realized: All that mattered was that he got Trancer into the back of the Swift. The wheelchair he was trapped in was far too large to fit inside as is. But if he took off the tires to reduce its size, then it should work.

The tires were attached to the wheelchair with hex nuts, but of course Minoru didn't have a wrench or anything like that. Instead, he grabbed the tires with his gloved hands and pulled with all his might.

"Oof... Uuurgh!"

It wouldn't do to yell, so he groaned as quietly as he could as he strained harder. The spokes dislodged one by one, and the rims began to bend out of shape. With Liquidizer's ability, this would have taken a fraction of a second, but she couldn't exactly help while she was fending off bullets.

"Aaagh!"

Minoru had a skinny frame, and while his running meant he had some confidence in his leg strength, his arms were another story. But as a Third Eye host, he was able at times to break through the limitations of his body through sheer force of will. His muscles trembled from his chest to his shoulders and arms, swelling and producing power far past their limits—

SNAP! The axles supporting the wheels broke in his hands. Throwing the tires aside, he grabbed the handles, lifted the wheelchair sideways with the last of his strength, and shoved Trancer feetfirst into the Swift. Closing the hatch, he shouted, "We're good!"

"As soon as they run out of bullets, we'll get out of here!"

Just seconds after Liquidizer's response, the firing from the Alphard stopped. The two police officers must have used up all their shots. Yumiko and DD would probably come out of the broken rear window any second; escaping before they were stuck fighting the pair of Jet Eyes was crucial.

Minoru and Liquidizer split to the right and left of the car, diving into the passenger's and driver's seat respectively. The engine roared to life, and Liquidizer switched gears and slammed down on the accelerator. The front wheels screeched for a moment, then dug into the surface of the road and zoomed forward.

"Keep your face covered, boy!"

This was probably because there might be any number of security cameras on the road ahead. It was a bit of a pathetic position, but Minoru had no choice but to duck down so that the dashboard hid his face, bracing himself with his legs. There was another loud screech as the car took a sharp left and sped up again.

"Wh-where are we going to escape to?!"

It was a little late to ask this question, but there was no helping that now. At any moment, the police would put out the word to be on the lookout for a white Swift, and an enormous manhunt would be underway starting from the Self-Defense Force Camp Mishuku. Minoru doubted they'd be able to escape for long by driving through the city like this.

But instead of answering, Liquidizer just cut the wheel again, drove across the sidewalk, and stopped.

"Stay down," she murmured in a low voice.

There was the sound of the car window opening. After a few

seconds, she pronounced, "All clear. There are no cameras here."

"....."

Minoru raised his head cautiously to see that they'd pulled into a nearby monthly parking lot. It was probably only half a kilometer from the site of the attack. *Are we going to switch cars here...?* he wondered, but Liquidizer spoke before he could ask.

"Most cars have immobilizers these days, so it wouldn't be easy to steal one. Get out of the car and take the sticker off the license plate, please."

"R-right..."

As Minoru did as he was told and opened the door, he could already hear faint sirens in the distance. They had no time to waste. He crouched down in front of the car and pulled off the fake license plate they'd stuck to it just a few minutes before.

As he stood up, he saw Liquidizer doing something strange. She was pressing both hands to the roof of the car, closing her eyes. Minoru wondered what she was doing, but she seemed to be in deep concentration, so he didn't ask. Instead, he went behind the car to finish the job he'd been given, and he had just finished peeling off the second sticker when suddenly—

—there was a faint watery noise, and the pure white of the Swift's exterior turned into countless droplets and splattered to the ground.

"...?!"

Minoru's eyes widened in shock. For a second, he thought she had melted the entire car, but of course that wasn't the case. Only the pearly white paint had turned to liquid, revealing a coat of elegant black paint beneath.

"I-it was painted twice? And you liquefied only the top coat...?"

Liquidizer shook her head. "I can't control it *that* precisely, of course. No, the white was a wrapping film; I just liquefied that... Get in."

Still dazed, Minoru opened the door and got back inside. Yes, paint and wrapping film were made of different materials, but to deliberately liquefy a film that was only a fraction of a centimeter thick was still an unbelievable feat.

I'm going to have to fight this person again someday...

The thought drifted through Minoru's mind once more as he fastened his seat belt.

Leaving the parking lot, the now jet-black Swift started driving south again. They had barely gone three hundred meters when they passed a patrol car with its sirens wailing. The officer in the driver's seat seemed to glance their way for just a moment, but he kept on driving without slowing down.

Swifts were a very common car, and since this one was a different

color and plate number from the one they were on the lookout for, there was no reason to suspect them. *Maybe we'll be able to get away after all.* As some of the tension left Minoru's shoulders, Liquidizer glanced at him.

"How is Trancer doing?"

"Ah..."

Of course that was most important to her right now. Lowering his seat, Minoru craned into the back.

Since he'd put the wheelchair in by the handles, Trancer was lying on his side with his feet toward the front seats, his face obscured. Reaching out his right hand, Minoru took hold of Trancer's left ankle, still secured to the wheelchair with the straps. With his hand over the tibial artery between the ankle and the Achilles tendon, Minoru could feel a steady pulse, though the drugs must have slowed it a bit.

"...His pulse is stable. I think they must have used some kind of anesthetic drug to knock him out."

"A drug... I hope that's all it is."

Minoru quickly realized what she meant. If it was just a drug, he would wake up once its effect wore off, but if it turned out to be some kind of Third Eye ability that had put him to sleep, it was possible that only that same ability could wake him up.

But even if that were the case, their top priority right now was running from the police and possibly the Self-Defense Force. Liquidizer turned right at the next intersection, heading west. Minoru thought she was going to cut through Setagaya Park and flee toward the Tama River, but when they reached the Loop Road No. 7 five minutes later, she turned right again and started driving north.

"Erm...where are we going, exactly?" Minoru asked.

"I haven't quite decided," Liquidizer replied simply.

"You haven't decided...?"

"My original plan was to hide out in a Syndicate safe house until things calm down, but that's dangerous now, too... At any rate, we just have to get as far away as possible for now."

"You mean we're going to leave Tokyo?"

"Not just Tokyo but possibly the Kansai region. In fact, we may even need to leave Japan."

"....."

Minoru had never once traveled overseas, so the thought hadn't even occurred to him. This made him wonder about something else. "Where did you learn French?"

"Canada."

He had no way of knowing whether this answer was true or not, so he glanced over at Liquidizer. There was no readable expression on her face as she sat deep in the seat.

The Swift drove through the Kamiuma underpass below Route 246, still heading north. They passed another patrol car, but it didn't seem to give them a second thought. Driving at a steady ten kilometers over the speed limit, Liquidizer smoothly proceeded in the left lane.

The smartphone in Minoru's inner pocket vibrated, so he took it out to find that Yumiko was calling him. Tapping the screen, he had scarcely brought the phone to his ear when she quickly asked, "*Are you all right?*"

"Yes, everyone's fine."

"*Good.*" Yumiko breathed what sounded like a sigh of relief, then continued in a hushed whisper. "*DD and I are still on the scene. They've transferred command of the situation from Public Security to the Special Task Squad.*"

"The STS...?"

"*Yes, apparently they got involved at some point. They're sending out helicopters, so keep an eye on the skies, too.*"

"A...all right."

"*Make sure you come back safe.*"

With that, Yumiko cut off the call. All she had asked was whether they were hurt, not their current location or their destination—probably a precaution for their own safety. Which meant that Minoru would have to complete the mission—make sure Liquidizer and Trancer got to a safe place and acquire the information about Stargazer—on his own.

Putting the phone back in his pocket, he relayed the information to Liquidizer.

"The Self-Defense Force's Special Task Squad has taken command. They're going to use helicopters to search..."

"I see. So they're finally getting serious."

Liquidizer pressed down slightly on the accelerator. Changing lanes, she passed a large trailer before returning to the left lane.

The clock on the car's navigation screen read 1:48 a.m. Minoru would normally be asleep by now—in fact, he'd be closer to waking up for the morning—but he was still so tense that he barely felt tired. Passing the Odakyu line, the car continued north across the Keio line. Soon they would be in Suginami Ward... Minoru opened the window a little and strained his ears, but he couldn't hear any helicopter sounds just yet.

If they were going to leave Tokyo, as Liquidizer had said, they would probably either cross Nerima Ward and get on the Kan-Etsu Expressway or stay on Loop Road No. 7 until Adachi Ward and take the Joban Expressway. Unless they really were going to leave the country, but Minoru had no idea how they would go about that.

But either way, all they could do for now was keep driving. The farther they got from the site of the attack, the higher their chances of escaping the net of the police and the Self-Defense Force.

Do Ruby Eyes feel this way all the time when they're running away from the SFD's attacks—or getting caught? Lost in thought, Minoru moved to close the window.

Then, suddenly, the view through the front windshield turned completely sideways. The car had slipped without any warning.

It felt bizarre, as if the road beneath the tires had suddenly disappeared. Losing its grip completely, the Swift went into a tailspin, sliding right toward the median strip on the right side.

“Nngh...!”

Liquidizer spun the steering wheel and dropped the gear. The right rear wheel connected with the curb of the partition, and the car finally regained its traction. Still zigzagging to the left and right, the car managed to return to the center of the lane.

“Wh-what happened?!” Minoru gasped.

“It’s Lubricator! In the Demio behind us!”

“.....!”

Frantically looking over his shoulder, Minoru saw the dazzling high beams of a car just twenty meters behind them. Its sharp front end, illuminated by the headlights of oncoming cars, certainly was that of a Mazda Demio.

“How did they know this was our car...?!” Minoru cried. The color and number were both different.

Liquidizer’s response was sharp and immediate. “They must be using a Third Eye ability besides Lubricator’s to track us! We have to deal with that, or we’ll never be able to get away!”

“Another ability user...?!”

His eyes wide, Minoru looked back again, but the wheelchair crammed into the back and the intense light of the high beams made it impossible to tell how many people were in the Demio. As he looked, the Swift slid sideways again.

This time, they were sent flying toward the guardrail on the left side of the street. Lubricator was creating that slippery film on the road, stealing every last bit of grip from the Swift’s tires. If they collided with the guardrail from the side at this speed, they might very well flip sideways onto the walkway.

“Urgh...!”

Minoru gritted his teeth and opened the passenger door about fifteen centimeters. He focused hard on the guardrail as they barreled toward it and, at the last possible second, stuck his left leg out the door. Activating his protective shell on the spot, he kicked off hard against the guardrail.

If he had done this without the barrier, even as a Third Eye holder, he would've broken his leg in several places, but the shell was like being protected by an impenetrable exoskeleton. That part of the guardrail crumpled under the weight of the car and its three riders, but they managed to avoid flipping over, and the Swift started gliding toward the right.

At that moment, they finally made it out of Lubricator's film, and the front wheels caught onto the surface of the road once again. Liquidizer slammed on the accelerator, the needle on the speedometer rocketing upward. Minoru closed the door, deactivated his protective shell, and shouted, "Sh-shouldn't we stop...?!"

"That's what Lubricator wants us to do! We won't be able to stop safely!" she snapped immediately.

She had a point: Even just touching the film while driving at a fixed speed was enough to send the car swerving. If it was hit while turning or slowing down, it would probably spin completely out of control.

"What's the range of his ability?!"

"About fifty meters!"

As she replied, Liquidizer raised the gear and sped up even more. If they could get out of his range, they'd be safe from the lubrication attacks—since they couldn't stop, their only choice was to pull ahead.

The engine revved while Minoru looked over his shoulder again. The Demio's headlights were a bit more distant, but they weren't shrinking any further.

"*Saleté!*" Liquidizer cursed in French. "For a Demio, it's awfully hard to shake."

"F-for a Demio?"

"When it comes to Japanese compact cars, the Swift and the Demio are close contenders. More importantly, get down! There's a speed camera up ahead!"

Minoru hurriedly ducked under the dashboard. The speed limit on Loop Road No. 7 was fifty kilometers per hour, and they were going over one hundred, so the automatic camera was bound to take a picture. While Minoru was ducking down, the Swift continued weaving back and forth and picking up speed.

"...All clear!"

Minoru raised his head and saw the Honancho underpass coming right toward them. Liquidizer chose the main road without hesitation, heading down the slope. As their speed rapidly increased, they quickly gained on the taillights of a cube truck moving slowly along the right lane.

Then, suddenly—

—one of the taillights burst as if it had exploded, and the rear

hatch of the Swift made a sharp sound. Feeling a chill on his spine, Minoru cried, "Th-they're shooting at us!"

Looking back, he saw the Demio staying about forty-five meters behind them, its driver's arm sticking out the window. There was a yellow flash, and another part of the car's back end made an ominous noise.

"Damn it... The windows aren't that thick, and neither is the rear hatch. Even a .45 ACP could penetrate certain areas!"

Minoru understood Liquidizer's concerns. Trancer was still lying unconscious in the back of the Swift, his legs near the ceiling and his head facing the hatch. If the glass broke, it could fall on his legs, and if a bullet pierced the hatch, it could strike his head.

The Swift passed the truck, went through the underpass, and zoomed up the incline. Liquidizer lowered the gear by one and sped up, sending the car into the air for a moment before it returned to the road. The Demio followed close behind them without slowing down.

From here on, the wide three-lane highway continued for a while, making it all too easy for Lubricator to aim. Minoru frantically undid his seat belt and tried to climb into the back through the gap between the seats. If he activated his protective shell and lay in front of the hatch, he should be able to protect Trancer.

But then he realized: If they kept this car chase up, that information would reach the STS before long. Speedy as the Swift might be, it couldn't outrun an attack helicopter. If they shot at the car with the same machine gun used at Keihinjima, the car and its riders alike would be ripped to pieces.

They had to stop the Demio, and Lubricator, immediately.

Minoru had said to Liquidizer before the mission began: *I'll deal with Lubricator somehow. If he attacks us again, please just focus on recovering Trancer.* He couldn't go back on his word now.

"...I'll stop him." Minoru didn't turn forward as he spoke. Liquidizer caught her breath.

"But...how...?"

"There's no time to explain! Just speed up as much as you can!"

".....!" Liquidizer hissed, but she didn't ask any more questions.

There were no other cars in front of them. The Swift's turbo engine roared, and the speedometer passed 150 kilometers an hour. They blew through a yellow light, emerging onto a long, straight stretch of road.

This is it.

"Make sure you get away!"

With that, Minoru opened the side door again.

The powerful wind force choked his breath. Before his eyes, the asphalt traced out endless lines. He activated his protective shell—and

jumped.

As soon as he leaped out of the passenger's seat, the wide-open door was blown shut by the wind. The Swift wavered for a moment but then straightened out and sped back up.

Watching the taillights grow distant out of the corner of his eye, he focused on the road ahead.

Minoru was hurtling through the air at a speed of well over one hundred kilometers an hour. If his weight was approximately fifty-five kilograms, then his current kinetic energy was about thirty kilojoules. If he hit the ground like this, the protective shell would keep him from being harmed, but he would probably roll along the road and eventually hit the guardrail. By then, Lubricator's Demio would be long gone, hot on the tail of the Swift.

He had to land on his feet, then dig in and stop himself.

It was a plan in direct opposition to the law of mechanical energy conservation. But then again, Third Eyes themselves already defied every known law of science. Professor Riri Isa said that when Minoru walked while in his protective shell, he wasn't technically stepping on the ground. He was unconsciously controlling his power to steady his feet in the air.

Now he had to do it with his own will.

In his silent world, the asphalt quietly drew closer. Minoru spread his feet wide, coming down in a crouching posture. As soon as he felt the invisible shell touch the ground, he thought with all his might:

STOP!!

There was no shock or sense of impact. His vision, which had been moving at unbelievable speeds, simply stopped in place.

A feeling unlike anything he'd ever experienced before assaulted Minoru's senses. If he had to compare it to anything, it was like the sense of discomfort when you stepped onto a nonmoving escalator, only multiplied several hundred times over. Where those thirty kilojoules of inertial energy went, he had no idea.

But in any case, he had successfully landed. There would be plenty of time later to worry about the implications of that as a student of science. For now, he had to complete his mission as an SFD member.

Looking up, he saw slanted headlights ahead and to the left. It was Lubricator's Demio, and there were no cars behind it.

Suddenly, something strange appeared on the road next to the Demio and came toward Minoru at an incredible speed. It was a gray shadow about five meters in diameter: a frictionless film.

The shadow slid right under Minoru and stopped. When he first experienced this attack in Yoyogi Park, Minoru had been so panicked that he even forgot how to walk while in his shell, and he fell prey to

it immediately. But not this time. Minoru wasn't standing on the asphalt to begin with. He put power into his right leg. Even on top of the film, his foot didn't slip one bit, bracing him completely.

"AAAARGH!"

Yelling, Minoru jumped forward with all his might. He crashed right into the front of the Demio, his knees out and arms crossed. The flow of time seemed to slow down, and all his senses grew clear.

Minoru could see the driver perfectly through the windshield. He was gripping the steering wheel tight and leaning forward, probably bracing himself against the impact of hitting Minoru. Unlike in Yoyogi Park, he wasn't wearing a fedora, but his face was still impossible to see, as a gray mask was still covering his entire head.

Oh, I get it, Minoru realized. The mask wasn't cloth, but the very same film created by his ability. His entire body was covered with the thin, frictionless film, which caused bullets to slide off, losing most of their energy before they could reach him.

But right now, Lubricator himself had accumulated a huge amount of kinetic energy.

Stop.

Minoru anchored his shell against the air again.

The front grille of the Demio was first to hit it. The glossy resin dented and cracked, sending flecks of paint everywhere. Next, the metal hood of the car crumpled like paper before Minoru's eyes, tearing apart to the left and right.



The destruction that followed looked like special effects from a Hollywood action movie.

The radiator was crushed, countless hoses and wires ripped every which way, and the engine itself came loose from the chassis and was crushed inward. The battery sent up sparks as it was blown away, which ignited the fuel that had leaked out, producing a billow of orange flames.

Though he was in the midst of all this destruction, Minoru didn't experience any pain, impact, sound, or heat. He simply watched with wide eyes as the entire car was destroyed.

When the poor Mazda Demio struck the indestructible protective shell, anchored firmly in midair, it was as if it had run full speed into a steel pillar driven deep into the ground. All of the kinetic energy of the one-ton car, moving at 150 kilometers an hour, recoiled directly into the car itself.

Just as the engine room was completely crushed, the car left the ground and flipped in midair.

And then Minoru saw the driver crash through the front windshield and go flying forward.

Even covered in a frictionless film, there was no way he could cancel out impact that had nowhere else to go. His charcoal suit ripped to shreds, and his necktie flew through the air. The dark liquid dripping from his lips must have been blood—he had apparently sustained massive damage to his internal organs.

With its front end completely destroyed, the Demio flipped in midair as it flew over Minoru's head, then hit the ground roof-first. Sparks flew as it skidded across the pavement and crashed into the highway median strip. Then it was instantly enveloped in enormous flames.

Releasing the anchor on his protective shell and standing up, Minoru rushed over to apprehend Lubricator. He dashed past the flaming Demio and looked around the highway.

There. About twenty meters away lay a dark figure. Minoru approached him carefully, his shell still active.

The man's expensive-looking suit was in tatters, and he'd lost a shoe, but it was definitely Lubricator. His arms and legs were splayed, and he wasn't moving.

Is he...dead?

If so, then it was Minoru who had killed him. His stomach dropped for a moment, but he forced himself to bear it. This wouldn't be the first time he killed a Ruby Eye. When his first enemy, Biter, had tried and failed to bite through Minoru's shell, his head had exploded, killing him. Minoru was responsible for that death, and Lubricator

probably wouldn't be the last, either. If anything, he should only be regretting that they hadn't been able to get any information about the Syndicate out of him.

As his thoughts raced, Minoru took another step forward.

Just then, Lubricator's left hand, which was hidden in the shadows of his body, moved like a snake. He pointed the large pistol in his hand at Minoru and fired repeatedly.

One of the three shots hit his shoulder, and two hit his heart—or more specifically, the air about two centimeters away from it—before being crushed and bouncing away. The slide on the pistol stopped moving, showing that it was out of bullets, but Lubricator kept trying to pull the trigger.

“.....”

Minoru silently walked forward, took the gun away with his left hand, and crouched down to grab the man's neck with his right. If he put strength into it, he could easily crush the man's respiratory tract or break his neck.

But of course, he wasn't going to do that.

He simply held on to the man's neck, staring at the face covered in its strange gray film.

Then, abruptly, the film fell away into a coarse powder.

Underneath it was the face of a middle-aged man, ordinary in every way except perhaps his thinness. As Minoru looked into his restlessly glittering eyes, he read only one emotion there, an emotion that gave him pause.

It was fear.

Lubricator—an executive of the Ruby Eye Syndicate on the same level as Liquidizer, a man charged with the role of executioner—was terrified of Minoru.

But I'm just the lowest-ranking SFD member, who can't do anything but protect myself.

Still, he strove to keep that bewilderment from showing on his face. If Lubricator wanted to be afraid, then let him. Surely this man had inflicted terror on other humans in the past.

A red light reflected off the guardrail to his right. As he turned to look, still holding Lubricator down, he saw countless patrol cars approaching from the other side of the flaming Demio. On top of that, there were five or so regular cars stopped in the left lane. The shards of plastic and metal scattered across the entire road were preventing them from passing.

As he wondered how to explain things to the officers, who probably had no idea of the situation, Minoru looked ahead again.

The Swift's taillights were long gone. When it dawned on him that he might never meet that person again, a strange feeling arose in

Minoru's chest, but it was a feeling even he couldn't identify.

“Honestly... If you’d just explained all this from the beginning, I would’ve made the arrangements to help.”

Minoru and Yumiko lowered their heads to the young girl in the lab coat standing with her arms crossed before them.

“Erm, yes, about that... We thought if we told you everything, it’d become your responsibility, so we didn’t want to cause any trouble for you...”

“I’m in charge here. It’s only natural that I should take responsibility for such things.” The girl—Professor Riri Isa, the SFD’s acting manager and strategic commander—spoke sharply, with a serious expression. “Also, Yukko, that ‘Erm, yes, about that...’ made you sound quite a bit like Mikkun.”

A strange “Guh?” noise emitted from Yumiko’s throat, and DD, who was sitting in a chair behind the Professor, snickered. Normally, this would warrant a death glare from the Accelerator, but they felt guilty for leaving DD out of the loop about the situation, so even she couldn’t muster up too much anger.

Looking at Yumiko and Minoru as they hung their heads, the Professor sighed and walked over to sit in her beloved mesh chair. Crossing her legs so that her cute slippers hung off her feet, she took a sip of the café au lait Minoru had prepared for her (about 90 percent “lait,” with the coffee being little more than a flavoring).

The time was 4:40 a.m. More than two hours had passed since the car chase on Loop Road No. 7. The night was still dark outside the window of SFD Headquarters’ fifth floor, but soon the first trains would be starting to run.

“...But since it was connected to Stargazer, I suppose I can’t blame you for your decision.” The Professor put down her mug and looked out the window. “Rescuing Cici...I mean, Claire...is my dearest wish, too. I never mentioned it before at Oli-V’s request, but now that things are in motion, I see no reason not to make this mission our top priority. Although it’s a shame Oli-V can’t be here now...”

“Um, how are he and Suu doing...?” Minoru asked.

The Professor spun in her chair. “Hinako only had light injuries, so she should be back tomorrow...that is, today. Oli-V will be staying for another day just to be safe, but his wounds are much less severe than what happened in Minami-Aoyama.”

“I see... That’s good.”

Minoru sighed in relief, then was hit with a wave of regret.

If only he'd stayed calm in Yoyogi Park, he would've been able to move normally in spite of Lubricator's film. He could have prevented Olivier from getting hit, Suu from getting struck—and Liquidizer from getting shot, too.

"Hey. You."

Yumiko suddenly reached out and prodded him in the side.

"Ow! ...Wh-what are you doing?"

"Figuring out exactly what you're thinking, that's what. Listen, you did your best, and the results prove it. Focus on the present right now, because we're going to need your help to rescue Claire, too."

"...All right."

Minoru nodded and turned his gaze toward the large monitor on the wall.

Displayed there was an online map and a single photo. The map was of Tokyo Bay, and the photo: a large cabin cruiser. It seemed to have been taken with a powerful telephoto lens, capturing the air rising off the waves.

"Who would've thought the Ruby Syndicate base was on a boat? I never would've sniffed that out, even if I patrolled the whole city," DD murmured.

"But you've gone across the Aqua-Line and the Bayshore Route a few times, right?" Yumiko asked. "You didn't pick up on it then?"

"Not at all. They're probably careful not to use their abilities on the ship."

"True. Your nose has become pretty famous by now."

As he listened to their exchange, Minoru once again felt relief that their mission hadn't failed. What had been intended as a simple exchange of information had turned into a big to-do, but they had still managed to get the information they needed without a single civilian, police officer, or SFD member getting killed.

Liquidizer had sent the photo to Minoru's smartphone just an hour prior. The text itself simply said "*Merci*," but the photo was encoded with latitude and longitude coordinates. It was clear this ship itself must be the Ruby Eye Syndicate base. If her information was to be believed, then that meant Olivier's younger sister, Claire Saito, was being held on that very vessel.

"...Damn, though, even with a fancy ship like this, how the hell can they live on a boat for months at a time?" DD sounded doubtful.

The Professor looked at the monitor. "Well, I'm sure it's not at sea all the time. They probably go back to the marina from time to time. Lots of people live like that on ships, you know."

"Huh, talk about a luxury cruise."

Yumiko glared at DD for his envy. "Why not buy yourself a

rowboat with your bonus when the SFD disbands, then? You could bring a tent on board and live in that, no?”

“That sounds like the opposite of luxury to me...”

“Anyway! Our next task is to figure out which marina this ship is contracted with. I doubt there are many marinas in all of Tokyo Bay that are big enough to dock a ship like this, so it shouldn’t be too hard.”

Yumiko stood up, clapping her fist to her palm.

The other SFD members besides Olivier undoubtedly wanted desperately to rescue Claire, too. Since Minoru had joined the SFD after the incident, he couldn’t say he understood how they felt 100 percent, but he certainly felt strongly that he wanted to help, too. If his older sister Wakaba were still alive, she undoubtedly would’ve told him to do whatever it took to get Claire back.

“...All right, I’d better go home for now.”

Yumiko came closer to Minoru. “Are you planning on going to school today?”

“Well, yes, of course. The third semester just started...”

“Aren’t you a dedicated student. I’ll drive you there so you can sleep on the way.”

Yumiko started to walk toward the door, but Minoru stopped her.

“No, it’s all right. You’ve been up all night, too... Besides, since it’s an outbound train, I should be able to get a seat.”

“Are you sure? No need to be shy.”

“I’ll have you help me practice riding a motorcycle sometime instead, if you don’t mind?”

At that response, Yumiko grinned slyly and clapped Minoru on the back. “Oh, I’ll help you out, all right.”

The sky was still dark when Minoru left SFD Headquarters. He hadn’t made much note of the midwinter cold during the mission, but now it chilled him to the bone.

Pressing his sleeves together and walking at a brisk pace to warm himself up, Minoru breathed out a white sigh.

He was finally going to have to buy a motorcycle, but he only had himself to blame. When he had written the report to the 3E Committee about how he had encountered and captured Lubricator, he could hardly say that he was working with Liquidizer, so he wound up writing that he was riding his motorcycle on Loop Road No. 7 when he came into contact with Lubricator.

This meant that they might eventually give him assignments under the assumption that he had a motorcycle, so though it was last-minute, he had no choice but to hurry along the process of acquiring a license and purchasing a vehicle. Yumiko seemed dead set on finishing

all of it within the week, so he would probably be practicing his motorcycle riding after school every day for the foreseeable future.

But right now, he was more concerned about Liquidizer than any of that. Since she had sent him a message, did that mean she had gotten to a safe place for the time being? What was she going to do next? And would she really keep her promise to Minoru to make sure Trancer never killed someone again?

In the car on the way back to SFD Headquarters, Minoru had asked Yumiko: How many confirmed victims had Liquidizer killed?

Yumiko thought for a moment, then said that the number of victims was unknown. In other words, they hadn't confirmed any kills by her hand.

Still, that wasn't basis enough to believe Liquidizer's claim that she had never killed anyone. In the hideout in Minami-Aoyama, she had certainly tried to kill Minoru and Suu without mercy. And just the night before, she probably would have liquefied the two officers in the van if Minoru hadn't stopped her.

Feeling conflicted, Minoru continued walking through the moonless dawn. When he reached the bright lights of Meiji Avenue, he took a right, walking down the just-opened stairs to the subway.

He had to wait a while for the first train to arrive, but when he finally settled in the heated train car, exhaustion hit him all at once. He had to change lines at Ikebukuro, so he couldn't fall asleep now. It was only when he thought to look at his vocabulary flash cards that he realized he was empty-handed.

His textbooks, notebooks, and flash cards were all in his messenger bag, which was still in the back seat of the Swift.

"....."

Minoru sat in silence for a moment, then leaned his head against the window.

He didn't know where Liquidizer was right now, but she could very well have already left the Kansai region. He'd probably never get that bag back. The notebooks were brand-new for the third semester, so he hadn't used them much yet, but he was probably going to have to buy five subjects' worth of textbooks all over again.

I should've had the SFD reimburse me for those, Minoru lamented with another small sigh.

Minoru's bike was still at the school, so it was 6:30 a.m. by the time he walked back to his house from Yonohonmachi Station.

He was just in time to get into the washroom before Norie woke up, so he removed his slightly sweaty uniform, took a shower, and changed into his spare uniform in his room. After he put some new notebooks and the few textbooks he hadn't lost into his old day pack,

he headed down the stairs, where Norie was just waking up. After saying good morning and apologizing for the unplanned sleepover, he joined her in preparing breakfast.

He left the house at his usual time.

As his familiar routine settled back into place, Minoru quickened his walking pace. Tomomi Minowa was supposed to be in the hospital for a few days, so it was unlikely he would see her on the way to school this morning, but he couldn't help looking every time a girl passed him in a Yoshiki High School tracksuit.

In the end, he hadn't had a chance to consult the other SFD members about the anemia that might be secretly spreading at his school. But now that it was a day later, the "pylori terrorist theory" that he'd discussed with Ogu seemed like a preposterous idea, and he couldn't help thinking there was probably a more logical explanation.

Ogu had said he would ask around the other athletic clubs if any of their members had symptoms of anemia, so Minoru could probably put off thinking about it further until hearing the results of Ogu's investigation. With that decided, he looked at the roof of the Super Arena and started walking up the stairs to the Hokosugi Bridge.

Before he crossed the bridge, he inhaled deeply and looked around, but he didn't see or smell anyone suspicious. Of course not. Liquidizer must be hundreds of kilometers away by now.

...Or so he thought.

He crossed the Hokosugi Bridge, walked east alongside the Cocoon City mall, and was getting close to the Yoshiki High School gates when goose bumps suddenly ran down his spine and rooted him to the spot.

Standing next to the gate was a girl in a black sailor uniform from a different school. She wore a dark-gray mod coat over her uniform and large black glasses, and she had her hair in two pigtails, just like she had on Hokosugi Bridge the day before yesterday. The only difference was the bag over her shoulder.

"Li..."

Minoru choked down the shout that sprang to his lips, along with the cold air. He couldn't cause a commotion here. Because Liquidizer was having some kind of conversation with a Yoshiki High School student.

"...Ohhh, so you're taking the transfer exam for this year? Do you know where the teachers' office is? I can take you there."

It was a female third-year student who was saying this. Minoru didn't know her name, but he was pretty sure she was on the student council. Liquidizer responded to her friendly offer with a very sincere-looking smile.

"Thank you very much. But a friend of mine from this school

already offered to guide me.”

“Oh my, how nice. Won’t you be cold waiting out here, though? Why not at least come inside?”

“Actually, it looks like he’s here now.”

Liquidizer turned, almost as if she had sensed Minoru’s approach—which she probably had. The student council girl looked over as well. Now he really had to say something.

“...G-good morning.” Greeting them in a quiet voice, he walked over, and the third-year stepped back and smiled.

“Make sure you show her around properly, all right? Ms. Kido, if you have any questions about the school, feel free to come to the student council room on your lunch break.”

“I will, thank you.” Liquidizer bowed her head politely.

As he watched the third-year walk away, Minoru voiced the first question that came to mind. “Er...who is Kido?”

“My fake name, obviously. More importantly, let’s take this elsewhere before we draw too much attention, shall we?”

Liquidizer glanced around seriously. Sure enough, the students walking past were casting curious glances toward the pair.

But where would we go? Nowhere’ll be open at this hour—

It took him a hot moment, but soon Minoru realized she was suggesting they go into the school.

NO WAY! he wanted to shout, but he was in no position to refuse. The students around them were essentially hostages. If Liquidizer wanted to, she could no doubt kill a dozen people on the spot within less than a minute. He had no choice but to obey.

Nodding stiffly, Minoru led the way into the school. Walking toward the courtyard for now, since there shouldn’t be any students there, he tried desperately to get his thoughts in order—but with too little information, combined with his lack of sleep, he simply had no idea what was going on.

“...Were you serious about transferring here?”

Once there were no students around them, Minoru asked a second question. Liquidizer rolled her eyes and sighed. “Of course not.”

“Then what are you doing here...? And how did you even know which school...?”

“I came to return this to you, Minoru Utsugi.”

Acting as if she was stating the obvious, Liquidizer took the bag off her right shoulder and held it out to him. Finally recognizing it as his own messenger bag, Minoru gaped in shock. He stayed frozen for a few more seconds, then hurriedly took it.

“Th...thank you very much. That’s a big help...”

Still, that didn’t solve the mystery. There wasn’t anything in the bag that would have given her his school name or address, as far as he

knew. Of course, his name and class number were written in his textbooks, but it would be difficult to figure out that he went to Yoshiki High School from that information alone.

Noticing his confused expression, Liquidizer prodded Minoru's chest. "You were wearing this uniform all day yesterday. I couldn't help remembering the crest on the buttons, could I?"

"Ah..."

Looking down at his shirt, he realized that while his buttons were currently hidden by his coat and scarf, he'd taken both off on several occasions the day before. All of the buttons were engraved with the school crest, so it was probably easy to narrow it down by looking up the websites of schools near the New Urban Center.

I've got to change clothes before missions from now on, Minoru thought.

"...Are you saying you looked up my school and came all the way here just to return my bag...?"

"Well, that's not the *only* reason." Liquidizer looked him up and down through her glasses, then continued. "I have two more pieces of business with you. One is a peace offering, and the other is a request."

"P-peace offering? What...?"

"As I mentioned when we spoke near the Super Arena, you have an interesting smell."

"....."

Minoru shrank back a little and looked at himself again. He'd just changed his uniform and showered, so how could he possibly smell sweaty already?

"No, I don't mean your body odor."

Liquidizer shrugged, then quickly closed the distance between them, bringing her face up to Minoru's neck. There weren't any other students nearby, but the courtyard wasn't completely empty, so Minoru nearly jumped away from her. But her next words froze him in place.

"It's the smell of an ability besides yours. It's incredibly faint, but *some other Third Eye holder* is doing something to you."

"What...?" Minoru caught his breath and looked from Liquidizer's face to his own hand and back. "A Third Eye ability? You mean there's an unknown Ruby Eye nearby...?"

"Pull it together, will you? How would a Ruby like me smell another Ruby's scent?"

"....."

Minoru fell silent for a while, then realized she was right.

Hosts to red and black Third Eyes alike had the ability to detect enemies by smell, but only enemies—so Jet Eyes could only smell Ruby Eyes, and Ruby Eyes could only smell Jets. The Searcher, DD,

was an exception; he could detect Jet Eyes by smell as well, but even that had a much smaller radius than his detection of Ruby Eyes.

“A Jet Eye is doing something to me...?” he muttered. His thoughts raced. Did that mean one of the SFD members was using some kind of ability to continuously affect Minoru in some way? But as far as Minoru knew, Chief Himi was the only member whose ability could work like that.

I haven't seen the chief in a while. How would he—? But this theory was dispelled by Liquidizer's next statement.

“It's not just you, boy. While I was standing by the gate, I checked to see if other students were being affected by this ability, and I noticed no less than four in the half hour since the gate opened. They were all being affected far more intensely than you, too. I don't know what exactly the effect does, but all of them looked pale, like they were on the verge of getting sick.”

“They were...pale?”

Those words clicked into place with the other fragments of information in Minoru's mind.

When Tomomi Minowa collapsed in front of Minoru's eyes the previous morning, her face was as white as a sheet.

Satoshi Tsumori looked pale when he glared at Minoru in the classroom, too.

And then there were the words that Shouya Ogu had said during that lunch break:

You mean...the kids who are good at school and sports are being targeted? Like someone went after Minowa and Maezaki and those nerds and infected them with H. pylori on purpose?

But the cause wasn't the *Helicobacter pylori* bacteria—it was a Third Eye ability, and that of a Jet Eye like Minoru, that was making students at the school anemic.

“Looks like you've thought of something.”

Liquidizer was observant as usual. Minoru nodded slowly.

“Yes... I thought it was a real illness, though. I never imagined it might be a Third Eye ability... But if that's the case, wasn't it dangerous to stand watch by the gate? What if you'd come across the Jet Eye themselves instead of just their victims?”

“Fine by me. I wanted to see their reaction. The SFD already knows my face anyway, so it wouldn't matter if someone saw me.”

“Reaction...? What if it had turned into a fight?”

“Oh, it wouldn't. Not with you Jets,” Liquidizer said casually, then looked toward the school. “Anyway, our new Jet friend doesn't seem to be here yet. Shall I help you identify them?”

“Erm...well...”

Minoru desperately wanted to say he could do it himself, but since

he couldn't distinguish the person by smell, it would be difficult to find the offending Jet Eye on his own. DD could probably finish the job before breakfast, but he wanted to get a bit more information before he reported this to the SFD. Otherwise, the information would probably go to the 3E Committee, and he wouldn't be surprised if they shut down the entire school over the incident.

"...Yes, please, if you don't mind. Um, just pointing them out would be great."

"Sure." Liquidizer nodded, then continued in a quieter voice. "Now, I don't mean to make you return the favor, but there is a little something I'd like your help with as well."

"Oh, right... You did say you had a request. What is it...?"

"We might not want to discuss it here. Is there anywhere we can speak in total privacy?"

Of course not; we're at a school, Minoru was about to say, but then he remembered: the top-floor landing in the south building Ogu had showed him just the day before.

"...Will it take long?"

"No more than five minutes, I imagine."

"Okay, then... Follow me, please."

Why do I keep getting stuck in these situations I can't control? Minoru wondered as he led the way toward the south wing.

Borrowing some guest slippers and entering the building, he waited until there were no teachers around to head up the stairs. When they managed to reach the fourth floor without anyone questioning them, Minoru sighed with relief and headed to the landing at the top of the stairs.

Glancing around Ogu's "secret hideout," Liquidizer smiled faintly. "I see. Every school has a well-kept secret spot like this one, I suppose."

"...Liquidizer, is this a disguise, or was your appearance yesterday the disguise?"

Minoru asked the question without thinking, then remembered that Yumiko had asked the same thing yesterday. Liquidizer deflected the question again, this time by saying "Believe whichever one you want," then started removing her coat.

"Wh-what are you doing?"

"I'm just taking off my jacket. Relax."

You really think I can relax right now? Minoru backed away but hit the wall immediately. Liquidizer held out her coat toward Minoru and spoke with a serious expression.

"I've thought about it, but as I said yesterday, the only explanation I can think of for how Lubricator was tracking me was that some other Third Eye-ability user has marked me somehow."

“Marked...?” Minoru echoed as he took her coat.

“Right. I wiped all my GPS devices clean and changed my phone, and he still found me... I have to get rid of the mark somehow, or it won’t matter how far away I run.”

“...So that’s why you’re still in Tokyo?”

Liquidizer raised an eyebrow. “Omiya isn’t in Tokyo.”

“I...I know that. I meant in the Tokyo area,” he mumbled, then asked another question. “So where is Trancer now...?”

“I can’t tell you his exact location, but he’s safe somewhere nearby. Except...” Liquidizer’s eyes clouded behind her glasses. “His breath and pulse are stable, but he won’t wake up for some reason. Third Eye users metabolize drugs quickly, so if it was any kind of anesthetic, it should have worn off by now...”

“What...?” Minoru furrowed his brow, thinking back to Trancer’s unconscious face from the night before. “But he wasn’t pale or anything. He looked like he could wake up at any minute...”

“I thought that might be because of a Third Eye ability, but I couldn’t smell a thing. If it was someone from the SFD—a Jet Eye ability—then I should be able to detect it.”

“...As far as I know, there’s not anyone in the SFD who can...”

Then Minoru hurriedly shut his mouth. He couldn’t go leaking top secret SFD information, even if it was just the lack of a certain ability. Even in this situation, Liquidizer was still a Ruby Eye, and an enemy.

Liquidizer smiled thinly, making no sign of whether she knew what he was thinking. “Well, I’ll take care of Trancer somehow. What I want your help with is the marking on me.”

“I can’t cancel out someone else’s ability or anything like that, though.”

“I won’t ask you to get rid of it.”

With that, Liquidizer lifted her arms at her sides.

“.....?”

“You’re going to have to smell me all over. It’ll be quite faint, but if there’s a mark on me somewhere, your Jet Eye nose should detect it.”

“...Huh?!”

I can’t do that! he wanted to exclaim, but she cut him off.

“Look, I’m not exactly going to enjoy it, either. But this is the only way... Besides, they might be marking you Jet Eyes with the same ability, you know. If you can get information about that ability now, then this is in your favor, too, no?”

“.....”

Minoru couldn’t disagree, as much as he wanted to. If any of the SFD members had been marked the same way without noticing, the location of SFD Headquarters could be exposed.

Steeling himself, Minoru took a step closer. He started to sniff from a few feet away, but Liquidizer stepped toward him as well.

“You won’t be able to tell from that far away.”

“...All right.”

Reminding himself that this was no time to get embarrassed, Minoru moved closer until his nose was almost touching her. First, he carefully smelled near her head, but all he could detect was her shampoo. Her ears and neck had the same results.

Then he realized something. “...Huh?”

“Did you find it?”

“No, not that... It’s just strange. From this distance, I should be able to smell your Ruby Eye scent...even if you’re not using your ability.”

“.....”

This time, Liquidizer was the one to look dumbfounded, a rare expression on her. Then she sighed. “Right... I suppose that’s true. So the scent would be mixed in, making it impossible for you to find it...”

“No, that’s not it...” He looked into her face, still barely a couple of centimeters away. “I don’t smell *anything*. Two days ago on the Hokusugi Bridge, and yesterday when we removed that bullet in the hotel in Shibuya, I could smell your Ruby Eye scent...but all I smell now is your shampoo.”

“What...?”

Liquidizer furrowed her brow, then suddenly leaned toward Minoru’s chest. She sniffed the air, then pulled away.

“...You’re right. I don’t smell your Jet Eye scent, either. But why?”

“Don’t ask me...”

Minoru was bewildered, but Liquidizer quickly got back to the subject.

“Well, we can worry about that later. If you can’t smell me right now, then that works out perfectly. Keep sniffing.”

“...Right.”

Left with no other choice, Minoru brought his nose close to her again. He checked her uniform’s collar, her back, and her arms, but there was no smell. Desperately trying to turn off his brain, he smelled near her chest and stomach as well, and just as he was moving from her right flank to her left—

“Ah!” Minoru exclaimed.

It was just for an instant, but he had detected something this time. That characteristically beastly smell, like metallic blood and wild animals mingled together.

Pressing his nose to the navy-blue fabric, he inhaled deeply. Sure enough, just five centimeters below her rib, there was the incredibly faint smell of a Ruby Eye ability.

“R-right here!”

Minoru prodded her side with his fingertip, and Liquidizer jumped.

“Wh...?! Don’t poke me out of nowhere!”

Brushing Minoru aside, she lifted the hem of her shirt without hesitation. Then she rolled up the thick fabric of her undershirt, exposing pearly white skin. She prodded the area a few times, then froze.

“Ah...there’s something here...” Liquidizer pinched the flesh between her two fingers, but Minoru couldn’t see anything.

“Wh-what should we do...?”

“You don’t have a scalpel and some disinfectant by any chance, do you?”

“Of course not.”

“Hrmm...”

Liquidizer reached into her skirt pocket and pulled out a hundred-yen coin. She held it up in front of her eyes and stared at it.

Suddenly, the bottom half of the coin changed shape, sagging into a long thread like melted caramel. Just as a drop started to separate from the tip, it hardened again with a tiny snap. What Liquidizer was holding was no longer a coin but a silver needle with a half-circle handle.

“...Are you going to stab yourself with that?”

“What else would I use it for?”

“Shouldn’t you disinfect it first?”

“Any bacteria on it would’ve been destroyed in the liquefaction process.”

With that, Liquidizer brought the needle toward the skin pinched between her fingers and carefully slid the sharp end into it vertically. Once it had gone in about a centimeter, she quickly pulled it out. A tiny droplet of blood formed at the edge of the wound.

At first, nothing else happened. But a few seconds later, Minoru’s eyes widened in shock.

Something was moving underneath Liquidizer’s skin.

A tiny object, smaller than a grain of rice, squirmed around unsteadily as it moved toward the cut. The drop of blood swelled up, trembled, and dropped to the floor.

“Wha...?!”

Minoru couldn’t help but let out a small cry as he saw it.

In the middle of the small spatter of blood was a cone-shaped insect, wriggling sluggishly. Its body was only about four millimeters long, and it didn’t appear to have legs, but there was a cluster of fine threads growing from its wider end.

Crouching down, Liquidizer jabbed the needle in her right hand

into the small insect. Then she stood up and stared at it closely. Minoru leaned in to look at it, too.

As the pair watched, the insect writhed for a while, then finally stopped moving. Immediately, it dissolved into a viscous red liquid and dripped off the needle.

“Wh...what in the world...?” Minoru whispered.

“I’m no biologist, but I don’t think there are any insects on Earth that melt after they die,” Liquidizer responded coolly. “It must’ve been made by an ability.”

“But...an ability that makes insects...?”

Then it occurred to him. Only five days ago, Minoru had just fought a Ruby Eye whose ability created different kinds of insects.

“Ah! So was that...Stinger’s...?!”

“It must have been.”

Liquidizer nodded gravely, then melted the needle in her hand. The silver liquid fell to the floor, forming microscopic metallic droplets that slid away into the cracks of the landing.

“When I fought Stinger hand to hand in Ooi Futo Park...he must have planted it on me then.”

“Now that you mention it...when Stinger was chasing Trancer, he used a superfine thread. If it came from a bug like that one...does that mean you’ve been trailing a thread behind you for the past five days?”

“Don’t make me sound like a caterpillar, please.” Liquidizer wrinkled her nose and pushed Minoru lightly on the chest, then shook her head. “I think I would’ve noticed that. No, these parasites—let’s call them ‘threadbugs’ for now—probably emit some kind of wireless signal if they’re able to enter a human host, and they just produce threads as a sign if they can’t.”

“Right... Even a bug that small would probably hurt a lot if it stabbed into you. The only way to get it into someone’s body without them noticing would be to distract them with other pain, I guess...”

The three bugs Stinger had used in battle so far—spinebugs, missilebugs, and wireworms—were already dangerous enough, but if he could create tracking bugs on top of that, then his ability really was on an entirely different level from anything they knew. If they were going to have to fight him again someday, they’d have to be sure to prepare very carefully...

“Huh...? No, wait a minute.” Minoru paused and looked at Liquidizer’s face.

“What is it?”

“Well...if that bug came from Stinger’s ability, doesn’t that mean that Lubricator was getting information from Stinger in order to track you? But five days ago, Stinger attacked Jet Eyes and Ruby Eyes indiscriminately...so wouldn’t Lubricator normally be a target of his,

too...?"

"You just realized that now?" Liquidizer said dryly, rubbing the area where she'd just removed the threadbug. "The simplest explanation is that Lubricator is connected with Stinger somehow. And if that's the case, then it might've been a different power that issued the order to kill me, not the Syndicate at all..."

"...Another Ruby Eye power besides the Syndicate?"

Unable to respond, Liquidizer simply tucked her undershirt back into her skirt. Then she took her coat off the doorknob and started to put it on, but she paused when she raised her left arm. Her wounded shoulder was probably still in pain.

Minoru reached out silently and helped to pull her coat on. Turning around, Liquidizer blinked at him. "Thank you... So what happened with Lubricator?"

For a moment, Minoru wasn't sure whether he should answer. But since the man had shot Liquidizer, he felt she had the right to know.

"They brought him to the same hospital where Trancer was being held. He was pretty heavily injured, so I think they'll be treating him for a while."

"I see." Liquidizer nodded. "You really saved the day by stopping that Demio, boy. I hate to admit it, but I wouldn't have been able to handle that alone."

"If you really were alone, I think you would've managed..." Minoru mumbled.

"Ha..." The Ruby Eye smiled wryly. "Having something to protect isn't easy, as it turns out. Not that I can complain, since it was my own choice. At any rate, just let me thank you. Although I'm sorry I have nothing more to offer you than words."

"Maybe you could stop calling me 'boy,' then?"

I don't think that's too much to ask, he thought. Liquidizer's smile only widened.

"All right then, Minoru."

Wait, I don't know if that's—

But it was too late to take it back now. As Minoru's face took on a strange expression, Liquidizer snickered, but then the smile vanished from her lips. Abruptly, she closed the distance between them and pulled him down.

"...?!"

"Quiet! I smell a Jet Eye!" she hissed in his ear.

Minoru's eyes widened. The only rooms on the fourth floor of the south building were prep rooms for each subject, so it was unlikely that any student would come here so close to the warning bell. If the Jet Eye had noticed Liquidizer's scent and come here, it was possible this would lead to a fight.

Crouching in the corner of the landing, Minoru prayed desperately for the person not to come any closer. Finally, they heard footsteps coming up the stairs. It sounded like a student's hallway slippers, not a teacher's sandals, padding along the resin floor.

The footsteps reached the fourth floor and paused. After a few tense seconds of silence, they finally started walking again: not up the stairs but into the hallway. There was the sound of a door opening and closing, and then silence.

Still being held down by Liquidizer, Minoru asked in a whisper, "Was that a victim just now...? Or was it...?"

"Judging by the strength of the scent, it must've been the perpetrator. And from this distance, they would've noticed my scent, too."

"Huh...? Then why...?"

Why didn't they either come toward you or run away? Minoru wanted to ask, but Liquidizer was ahead of him.

"They must not know."

"...?!"

"They noticed a smell, but they didn't realize it's the smell of a Ruby Eye, the natural enemy of Jet Eyes. In other words, it's a 'stray Jet'—one who's never had contact with another Third Eye host."

Minoru fell silent. This possibility hadn't even occurred to him. It had already been over three months since the red and black Third Eyes rained down on the Tokyo area. So this person had gone on living their life normally all this time, never once encountering another Third Eye host?

"That Jet Eye took a right and went into a room about ten meters down the hallway. What are you going to do?"

Minoru looked at the clock. There were only five minutes until the warning bell and ten minutes until the brief morning homeroom period. Considering the time it would take to get to the first-years' Class One room, he only had about ten minutes to spare, but he couldn't let this opportunity slip to catch the Jet Eye in question alone.

"...I'll go."

At that, Liquidizer released her grip on Minoru's head. "Then I'll come with you."

"What? Why...?"

"There's a chance this is a trap set for me, albeit a very low one. But I wouldn't want to lose sleep if you got killed because you were mistaken for me, b...Minoru."

"...Thanks for your concern. But even if it is a trap, please don't kill them, all right?"

"I know, I know."

The pair stood up together and headed down the stairs.

The fourth floor of the south building was completely silent. As they proceeded right, they passed the world history prep room and the Japanese history prep room, then reached the math prep room. If the Jet Eye had gone ten meters down the hall, they must have entered this room.

As Minoru looked up at the sign next to the door, a voice suddenly echoed in the back of his mind.

Would you like to come check it out sometime? I'm sure you're more than qualified to join the math club now.

The person who had said that to him was Akitoshi Hazama, from Class Two of the first-years. And the math prep room was also used as the clubroom for the math club.

Was Hazama the Jet Eye waiting behind this door? He was the only one in the top grade ranks who didn't have anemia symptoms, so that was certainly a logical assumption. To be honest, Minoru didn't do well with people like him, but he was going to have to persuade him somehow to cancel out the ability that was tormenting Tomomi and the others.

Liquidizer elbowed him as if to say, *Hurry it up already*. Taking a deep breath, Minoru reached out, pushed the door open, and stepped inside.

The math prep room was bigger than he'd expected. The left and right walls had bookcases up to the ceiling, and there was a long, thin table in the center of the room. Folding chairs were lined along either side of the table, and in one of them sat...a petite female student. The color of her hallway slippers indicated she was a first-year.

“.....?!”

Surprised, Minoru looked around the room, but there was no one else in sight and nowhere to hide. Then he turned to Liquidizer, who'd followed him inside. “Is she the one...?” he whispered.

“No doubt about it.”

Her response was so prompt and certain that Minoru had no choice but to accept it. So Hazama wasn't the Jet Eye who'd been spreading disorders through Yoshiki High.

The female student stared up at Minoru and Liquidizer in shock for a moment, but finally she seemed to sense something about them and stood up from her chair with a clatter. Grabbing her textbook off the table, she clutched it to her chest as she backed away. Her long hair swayed at either side of her face, revealing the skinny outline of her features.

“Wh...who are you two?! You're not in the math club, are you?!”

Her thin voice jogged Minoru's memory, bringing to mind a single scene.

Minoru had met this student before. He didn't know her name, but they'd come across each other just the day before.

It was the girl whom Tsumori had crashed into in the stairwell yesterday. Minoru had offered to help her, but she'd muttered "I'm fine" and hurried up the stairs. Maybe that incident had been no mere accident. Did she run into Tsumori on purpose to use her ability on him?



“So you’re the one who’s been making people sick? Like Tsumori from Class One, Minowa from the track-and-field club, and Maezaki from the volleyball club?”

The girl looked aghast at that and backed away even farther, until she bumped into the bookshelf and knocked down one of the old textbooks.

Minoru watched as the shock on her face slowly turned into fear.

“Don’t come any closer!” she cried, holding up her right hand. “I...I’m cursed, all right? Anyone I touch gets sick!”

“C-cursed...?”

“Yes! It’s true! Y...you’re on the list, too, so if you come any closer, I’ll make you sick!”

“Huh...?” Minoru was dumbfounded.

“I told you someone was doing something to you, didn’t I?” Liquidizer whispered. “Of course you’re on this so-called list.”

“.....”

Liquidizer had a point. Maybe this girl had used her power on Minoru without his noticing during their encounter yesterday.

“Did you make this ‘list’?” Minoru asked.

At that, the girl clamped her mouth shut. Obviously, it wasn’t her, then. Someone else had made a list of targets for her, and she had gone after Tsumori, Tomomi, and even Minoru because of it.

Which meant the creator of the list could only be one person.

“It was Hazama, wasn’t it? He made the list and had you use your ability...your ‘curse’...on the people he chose.”

“.....!!”

The girl’s face turned pale. Her fear was rapidly becoming hostility now.

“...Hazama saved me when I was being bullied. He said that if I used my curse properly, I could change this whole school for the better. He helped me!”

“No, he didn’t. He’s just using you.”

“That’s not true! He promised he would break down this worthless caste system so that I can go back to class again!”

The textbook slipped from her fingers and fell to the floor. Instead, she grabbed an aluminum mop from the corner of the room and brandished it with both hands.

“Get out! Don’t try to stop me!!” she shrieked.

But Minoru couldn’t just leave. He had to somehow tell the student that her power wasn’t a curse—it was an ability given to her by a black sphere from outer space.

Without saying a word, he took a step closer. Immediately, the girl launched herself forward.

She jabbed the mop toward him like a spear, far faster than one would imagine from her small stature. If he simply let it hit him, even a Third Eye host like Minoru might break a rib.

But since Minoru had done battle against murderous Ruby Eyes, catching a mop handle that was coming straight toward him was an easy feat.

The young woman's charge jerked to a stop. Minoru clamped down on the mop in his right hand with all his strength.

SNAP! The handle bent cleanly in half. Her eyes widening, the girl froze in place.

Just then, a sudden wave of cold air rolled over them from behind, making Minoru catch his breath. But it wasn't an actual breeze. The powerful Ruby Eye aura that Liquidizer had been completely suppressing all this time—what Professor Riri Isa would call the “seventh force”—had suddenly been unleashed.

Minoru was paralyzed for only a moment, but since this was likely her first encounter with a Ruby Eye, the female student's reaction was much stronger.

“Heeek...!” She gave off a thin shriek, dropped the mop, and crumpled to her knees. Then, still on the floor, she skittered away as fast as she could.

“...Well, I'd best be on my way.” Hiding her aura again, Liquidizer patted Minoru on the shoulder. “Thanks for all your help, Minoru. I'll be in touch again.”

With that, she turned around, went into the hallway, and shut the door behind her. Minoru heard the sound of her slippers recede into the distance and disappear.

“.....”

Looks like we might be mixed up with each other for a while longer after all.

As the thought drifted through his mind, Minoru looked at his schoolmate. Her hands were clasped to her chest, and her entire body was shaking. There were tears forming in her widened eyes, one already trickling down her cheek.

Minoru had no idea what would happen to this student from now on. Someone would probably be dispatched from the SFD to explain the situation in detail. Then it would be up to her to decide whether to have the Third Eye removed and her memories erased, or join the fight as an SFD member.

But for now, as someone who hosted the same parasite within him, Minoru intended to be as honest with her as possible. Even if it meant they would be late to first period.

Steadying his resolve, Minoru walked over to her and held out his hand.

“You’ll get your uniform dirty.”

The girl flinched a little at his words, but she didn’t try to run away any farther.

Finally, she reached out slowly and hesitantly, and she took Minoru’s hand.

The End

AFTERWORD

Thank you very much for reading *The Isolator, Volume 5: The Liquidizer*.

There was already a long space between Volumes 3 and 4, but this time I kept you waiting for two whole years... I'm so, so sorry! But it's entirely thanks to all your support for this title that I'm able to release a new volume after all that time. Really, thank you so much.

Though it's been two years in the real world, only two days have passed since the events of Volume 4 in the world of this story. In fact, it's barely even been five days since Volume 3...! We've been in the middle of winter for so long that Minoru and friends must be getting very cold. But we've finally reached what you might call the first major turning point of the story: Ms. Liquidizer, who's been a fearsome executive from the SFD's enemy, the Syndicate, up until now, is a protagonist in this volume.

In the past, I've gone around saying things like "I don't like it when enemies turn into allies" and "I make my enemies extra-evil to make sure that doesn't happen." But in Liquidizer's case, I always had a feeling that something might be different about her, so I kept wondering what would happen as I wrote. In the end, this is what happened, but you can't exactly say they've fully become allies, so I think there will continue to be a lot of tension surrounding her activities in the future.

For my usual round of casual commentary this time, I'll be discussing Minoru's protective shell's new ability, anchoring. In the story, it's explained as Minoru anchoring himself against the air, but there's no such thing as an "absolute state of rest" in our universe (please look up "absolute rest theory" for more information), so that's technically impossible. If there is a hypothetical center of expansion in our universe, I think you could use that as a starting point to define a coordinate system, but all parts of the universe are constantly expanding equally, so there's apparently no center... (And if Minoru did anchor himself against the center of the universe, he'd immediately go flying off somewhere at hundreds of kilometers per

hour.)

Therefore, please allow me to define Minoru's anchoring ability as "part or all of the protective shell unconditionally maintaining a subjective state of rest." (The "subjective" part means that Minoru feels as if he is at absolute rest.) ...Sorry, I feel like that only made things even more confusing... Oh, and the new character Lubricator's abilities never got a complete explanation, but I intend to touch on that in the next volume.

I have to apologize to my editors, Miki and Adara, and my illustrator, Shimeji, for causing them so much trouble by dragging out the writing of this volume for so long! As always, thank you for doing such a wonderful job! And to all you readers, please look forward to Volume 6, which is planned to cover the long-awaited rematch against Stinger!

A certain day in March 2019
Reki Kawahara

Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

To get news about the latest manga, graphic novels, and light novels from Yen Press, along with special offers and exclusive content, sign up for the Yen Press newsletter.

Or visit us at www.yenpress.com/booklink

Contents

Cover
Insert
Title Page
Copyright
Sect. 005 The Liquidizer
Afterword
Yen Newsletter